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LITTLE TIN SOLDIER

By Bill Peters



GREAT! NEW!
SCIENCE FICTION

By

MURRAY LEINSTER • PHILLIP DICK

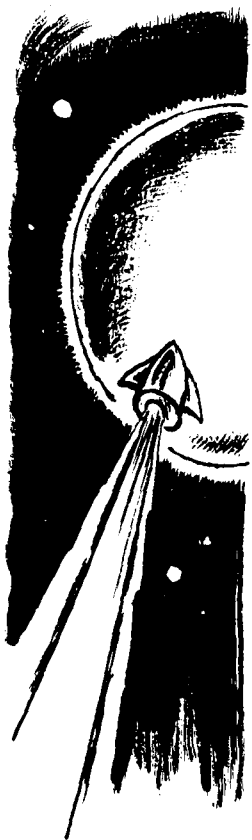
RICHARD WILSON • VERN FEARING

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A preview of—

POISON PLANET —coming in the great

July issue of— **AMAZING STORIES**



... For a wild instant, as the air car began to descend toward the weird-looking island, Marc considered attempting to use his new-found extra-sensory powers to extricate himself from the difficulty. But he felt too unsure of them—of his power to handle them. Instead, his hand moved toward the tiny blaster Donna had given him.

He wondered if the blaster were a booby trap—cunningly given him by the girl so that he would destroy himself when defense seemed imperative. At any rate, the time had come.

Hand in pocket, he turned. Manuel asked, "What's the matter?"

"This is as far as I go. You might as well shoot."

As he turned, he heard Donna's desperate voice. "Don't! Manuel! In heaven's name——!"

But Manuel's blaster had come around and Marc had a quick vision of the lovely girl melting down horribly into a sickening mass of baked flesh and charred bones.

Swift thoughts flashed through Marc's mind. How lovely Donna had looked that night in New Orleans—the weird and wonderful planet of the blue moon—the fate of poor Itchy...

Be sure to read this arresting tale of terror, adventure and intrigue, laid in a fabulous world of the future. Don't forget. In the July issue of—

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or so you say . . .

Sir:

In the March issue, the story "The Double Spy" . . . is the finest short that I have read in three and a half years of avid stf reading.

Waltham, Mass.

ALAN MILLER

Sir:

"Death of a Spaceman," by Miller, was excellent. A fine piece of writing. . . . It takes unusual ability to make a story of this type credible.

Portland, Ore.

RICHARD E. GEIS

Sir:

What a fine novel "Call Him Savage," by John Pollard, could have been if the author had added another 30,000 words! Do you *force* writers to trim a story to meet definite lengths?

Tulsa, Okla.

MILTON ROSS

☉ *We don't force writers to do anything; but, knowing our top length, writers trim their stories to meet requirements.—Ed.*

Sir:

One of the most unusual alien-invasion thêmes I've ever encountered was Pollard's "Call Him Savage." The writing and characterization were slick. . . .

Racine, Wis.

E. M. KUBITSKY

Sir:

Best story in your March issue, by far, was Bixby's "The Draw." Never thought I'd see the day when I'd enjoy a Western science-fiction yarn!

Macon, Ga.

LEE OSTERHOW

Cartoons

Sir:

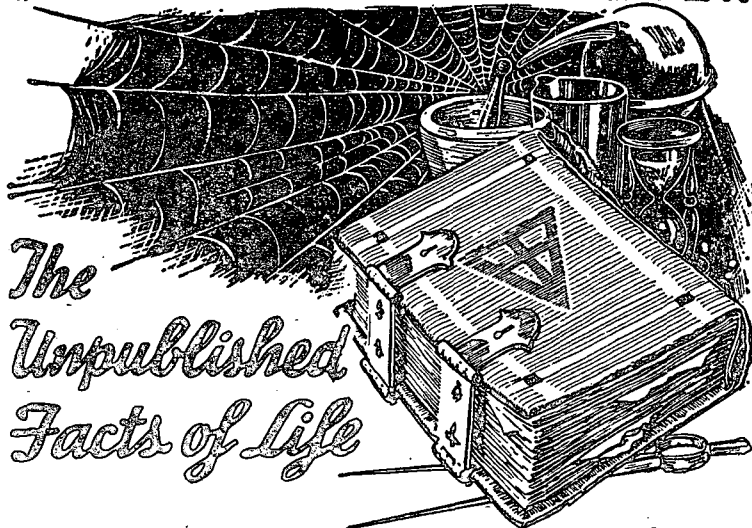
I've heard it said that you don't need good stories or articles to sell magazines; just stick in good cartoons. Is that the secret of your success?

Providence, Rhode Island.

JAMES COOLEY

☉ *Partly—Ed.*

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Small Town

BY PHILIP K. DICK

The theme of "the man who played God" has been used many ways in many stories, but never with more tense and chilling effect than in this tight little yarn by the very able Mr. Dick. You'll like it, we're sure.



VERNE HASKEL crept miserably up the front steps of his house, his overcoat dragging behind him. He was tired. Tired and discouraged. And his feet ached.

"My God," Madge exclaimed, as he closed the door and peeled off his coat and hat. "You home already?"

Haskel dumped his briefcase and began untying his shoes. His body sagged. His face was drawn and gray.

"Say something!"

"Dinner ready?"

"No, dinner isn't ready. What's wrong this time? An-

other fight with Larson?"

Haskel stumped into the kitchen and filled a glass with warm water and soda. "Let's move," he said.

"Move?"

"Away from Woodland. To San Francisco. Anywhere." Haskel drank his soda, his middle-aged flabby body supported by the gleaming sink. "I feel lousy. Maybe I ought to see Doc Barnes again. I wish this was Friday and tomorrow was Saturday."

"What do you want for dinner?"

"Nothing. I don't know."



Haskel shook his head wearily. "Anything." He sank down at the kitchen table. "All I want is rest. Open a can of stew. Pork and beans. Anything."

"I suggest we go out to Don's, Steakhouse. On Monday they have good sirloin."

"No. I've seen enough human faces today."

"I suppose you're too tired to drive me over to Helen Grant's."

"The car's in the garage. Busted again."

"If you took better care of it—"

"What the hell you want me to do? Carry it around in a cellophane bag?"

"Don't shout at me, Verne Haskel!" Madge flushed with anger. "Maybe you want to fix your own dinner."

Haskel got wearily to his feet. He shuffled toward the cellar door. "I'll see you."

"Where are you going?"

"Downstairs in the basement."

"Oh, Lord!" Madge cried wildly. "Those trains! Those toys! How can a grown man, a middle-aged man—"

Haskel said nothing. He was already half way down the stairs, feeling around for the basement light.

The basement was cool and

moist. Haskel took his engineer's cap from the hook and fitted it on his head. Excitement and a faint surge of renewed energy filled his tired body. He approached the great plywood table with eager steps.

Tracks ran everywhere. Along the floor, under the coal bin, among the steam pipes of the furnace. The tracks converged at the table, rising up on carefully graded ramps. The table itself was littered with transformers and signals and switches and heaps of equipment and wiring. And—

And the town.

The detailed, painfully accurate model of Woodland. Every tree and house, every store and building and street and fireplug. A minute town, each facet in perfect order. Constructed with elaborate care throughout the years. As long as he could remember. Since he was a kid, building and glueing and working after school.

Haskel turned on the main transformer. All along the track signal lights glowed. He fed power to the heavy Lionel engine parked with its load of freight cars. The engine sped smoothly into life, gliding along the track. A flashing dark projectile of metal that

made his breath catch in his throat. He opened an electric switch and the engine headed down the ramp, through a tunnel and off the table. It raced under the work bench.

His trains. And his town. Haskell bent over the miniature houses and streets, his heart glowing with pride. He had built it—himself. Every inch. Every perfect inch. The whole town. He touched the corner of Fred's Grocery Store. Not a detail lacking. Even the windows. The displays of food. The signs. The counters.

The Uptown Hotel. He ran his hand over its flat roof. The sofas and chairs in the lobby. He could see them through the window.

Green's Drugstore. Bunion pad displays. Magazines. Frazier's Auto Parts. Mexico City Dining. Sharpstein's Apparel. Bob's Liquor Store. Ace Billiard Parlor.

The whole town. He ran his hands over it. He had built it: the town was his.

The train came rushing back, out from under the workbench. Its wheels passed over an automatic switch and a drawbridge lowered itself obediently. The train swept over and beyond, dragging its cars behind it.

Haskell turned up the power. The train gained speed. Its whistle sounded. It turned a sharp curve and grated across a cross-track. More speed. Haskell's hands jerked convulsively at the transformer. The train leaped and shot ahead. It swayed and bucked as it shot around a curve. The transformer was turned up to maximum. The train was a clattering blur of speed, rushing along the track, across bridges and switches, behind the big pipes of the floor furnace.

It disappeared into the coal bin. A moment later it swept out the other side, rocking wildly.

Haskell slowed the train down. He was breathing hard, his chest rising painfully. He sat down on the stool by the workbench and lit a cigarette with shaking fingers.

The train, the model town, gave him a strange feeling. It was hard to explain. He had always loved trains, model engines and signals and buildings. Since he was a little kid, maybe six or seven. His father had given him his first train. An engine and a few pieces of track. An old wind-up train. When he was nine he got his first real electric train. And two switches.

He added to it, year after

year. Track, engines, switches, cars, signals. More powerful transformers. And the beginnings of the town.

He had built the town up carefully. Piece by piece. First, when he was in junior high, a model of the Southern Pacific Depot. Then the taxi stand next door. The cafe where the drivers ate. Broad Street.

And so on. More and more. Houses, buildings, stores. A whole town, growing under his hands, as the years went by. Every afternoon he came home from school and worked. Glued and cut and painted and sawed.

Now it was virtually complete. Almost done. He was forty-three years old and the town was almost done.

Haskel moved around the big plywood table, his hands extended reverently. He touched a miniature store here and there. The flower shop. The theater. The Telephone Company. Larson's Pump and Valve Works.

That, too. Where he worked. His place of business. A perfect miniature of the plant, down to the last detail.

Haskel scowled. Jim Larson. For twenty years he had worked there, slaved day after day. For what? To see others advanced over him. Younger

men. Favorites of the boss. Yes-men with bright ties and pressed pants and wide, stupid grins.

Misery and hatred welled up in Haskel. All his life Woodland had got the better of him. He had never been happy. The town had always been against him. Miss Murphy in high school. The frats in college. Clerks in the snooty department stores. His neighbors. Cops and mailmen and bus drivers and delivery boys. Even his wife. Even Madge.

He had never meshed with the town. The rich, expensive little suburb of San Francisco, down the peninsula beyond the fog belt. Woodland was too damn upper-middle class. Too many big houses and lawns and chrome cars and deck chairs. Too stuffy and sleek. As long as he could remember. In school. His job—

Larson. The Pump and Valve Works. Twenty years of hard work.

Haskel's fingers closed over the tiny building, the model of Larson's Pump and Valve Works. Savagely, he ripped it loose and threw it to the floor. He crushed it underfoot, grinding the bits of glass and metal and cardboard into a shapeless mass.

God, he was shaking all over. He stared down at the remains, his heart pounding wildly. Strange emotions, crazy emotions, twisted through him. Thoughts he never had had before. For a long time he gazed down at the crumpled wad by his shoe. What had once been the model of Larson's Pump and Valve Works.

Abruptly he pulled away. In a trance he returned to his workbench and sat stiffly down on the stool. He pulled his tools and materials together, clicking the power drill on.

It took only a few moments. Working rapidly, with quick, expert fingers, Haskel assembled a new model. He painted, glued, fitted pieces together. He lettered a microscopic sign and sprayed a green lawn into place.

Then he carried the new model carefully over to the table and glued it in the correct spot. The place where Larson's Pump and Valve Works had been. The new building gleamed in the overhead light, still moist and shiny.

WOODLAND MORTUARY

Haskel rubbed his hands in an ecstasy of satisfaction. The

Valve Works was gone. He had destroyed it. Obliterated it. Removed it from the town. Below him was Woodland—without the Valve Works. A mortuary instead.

His eyes gleamed. His lips twitched. His surging emotions swelled. He had got rid of it. In a brief flurry of action. In a second. The whole thing was simple—amazingly easy.

Odd he hadn't thought of it before.

Sipping a tall glass of ice-cold beer thoughtfully, Madge Haskel said, "There's something wrong with Verne. I noticed it especially last night. When he came home from work."

Doctor Paul Tyler grunted absently. "A highly neurotic type. Sense of inferiority. Withdrawal and introversion."

"But he's getting worse. Him and his trains. Those damn model trains. My God, Paul! Do you know he has a whole town down there in the basement?"

Tyler was curious. "Really? I never knew that."

"All the time I've known him he's had them down there. Started when he was a kid. Imagine a grown man playing with trains! It's—it's disgusting

ing. Every night the same thing."

"Interesting." Tyler rubbed his jaw. "He keeps at them continually? An unvarying pattern?"

"Every night. Last night he didn't even eat dinner. He just came home and went directly down."

Paul Tyler's polished features twisted into a frown. Across from him Madge sat languidly sipping her beer. It was two in the afternoon. The day was warm and bright. The living room was attractive in a lazy, quiet way. Abruptly Tyler got to his feet. "Let's take a look at them. The models. I didn't know it had gone so far."

"Do you really want to?" Madge slid back the sleeve of her green silk lounge pajamas and consulted her wristwatch. "He won't be home until five." She jumped to her feet, setting down her glass. "All right. We have time."

"Fine. Let's go down." Tyler caught hold of Madge's arm and they hurried down into the basement, a strange excitement flooding through them. Madge clicked on the basement light and they approached the big plywood table, giggling and nervous, like mischievous children.

"See?" Madge said, squeez-

ing Tyler's arm. "Look at it. Took years. All his life."

Tyler nodded slowly. "Must have." There was awe in his voice. "I've never seen anything like it. The detail. . . . He has skill."

"Yes, Verne is good with his hands." Madge indicated the workbench. "He buys tools all the time."

Tyler walked slowly around the big table, bending over and peering. "Amazing. Every building. The whole town is here. Look! There's my place."

He indicated his luxurious apartment building, a few blocks from the Haskel residence.

"I guess it's all there," Madge said. "Imagine a grown man coming down here and playing with model trains!"

"Power." Tyler pushed an engine along a track. "That's why it appeals to boys. Trains are big things. Huge and noisy. Power-sex symbols. The boy sees the train rushing along the track. It's so huge and ruthless. it scares him. Then he gets a toy train. A model, like these. He controls it. Makes it start, stop. Go slow. Fast. He runs it. It responds to him."

Madge shivered. "Let's go

upstairs where it's warm. It's so cold down here."

"But as the boy grows up, he gets bigger and stronger. He can shed the model-symbol. Master the real object, the real train. Get genuine control over things. Valid mastery." Tyler shook his head. "Not this substitute thing. Unusual, a grown person going to such lengths." He frowned. "I never noticed a mortuary on State Street."

"A mortuary?"

"And this. Steuben Pet Shop. Next door to the radio repair shop. There's no pet shop there." Tyler cudgeled his brain. "What is there? Next to the radio repair place."

"Paris Furs." Madge clasped her arms. "Brrrrr. Come on, Paul. Let's go upstairs before I freeze."

Tyler laughed. "Okay, sis-sy." He headed toward the stairs, frowning again. "I wonder why. Steuben Pets. Never heard of it. Everything is so detailed. He must know the town by heart. To put a shop there that isn't—" He clicked off the basement light. "And the mortuary. What's supposed to be there? Isn't the—"

"Forget it," Madge called back, hurrying past him, into the warm living room.

"You're practically as bad as he is. Men are such children."

Tyler didn't respond. He was deep in thought. His suave confidence was gone; he looked nervous and shaken.

Madge pulled the venetian blinds down. The living room sank into amber gloom. She flopped down on the couch and pulled Tyler down beside her. "Stop looking like that," she ordered. "I've never seen you this way." Her slim arms circled his neck and her lips brushed close to his ear. "I wouldn't have let you in if I thought you were going to worry about *him*."

Tyler grunted, preoccupied. "Why *did* you let me in?"

The pressure of Madge's arms increased. Her silk pajamas rustled as she moved against him. "Silly," she said.

Big red-headed Jim Larson gaped in disbelief. "What do you mean? What's the matter with you?"

"I'm quitting." Haskel shoveled the contents of his desk into his briefcase. "Mail the check to my house."

"But—"

"Get out of the way." Haskel pushed past Larson, out into the hall. Larson was stunned with amazement. There was a fixed expression on Haskel's face. A glazed

look. A rigid look Larson had never seen before.

"Are you—all right?" Larson asked.

"Sure." Haskell opened the front door of the plant and disappeared outside. The door slammed after him. "Sure I'm all right," he muttered to himself. He made his way through the crowds of late-afternoon shoppers, his lips twitching. "You damn right I'm all right."

"Watch it, buddy," a laborer muttered ominously, as Haskell shoved past him.

"Sorry." Haskell hurried on, gripping his briefcase. At the top of the hill he paused a moment to get his breath. Behind him was Larson's Pump and Valve Works. Haskell laughed shrilly. Twenty years — cut short in a second. It was over. No more Larson. No more dull, grinding job, day after day. Without promotion or future. Routine and boredom, months on end. It was over and done for. A new life was beginning.

He hurried on. The sun was setting. Cars streaked by him, businessmen going home from work. Tomorrow they would be going back—but not him. Not ever again.

He reached his own street. Ed Tildon's house rose up, a great stately structure of con-

crete and glass Tildon's dog came rushing out to bark. Haskell hastened past. Tildon's dog. He laughed wildly.

"Better keep away!" he shouted at the dog.

He reached his own house and leaped up the front steps two at a time. He tore the door open. The living room was dark and silent. There was a sudden stir of motion. Shapes untangling themselves, getting quickly up from the couch.

"Verne!" Madge gasped. "What are you doing home so early?"

Verne Haskell threw his briefcase down and dropped his hat and coat over a chair. His lined face was twisted with emotion, pulled out of shape by violent inner forces.

"What in the world!" Madge fluttered, hurrying toward him nervously, smoothing down her lounge pajamas. "Has something happened? I didn't expect you so—" She broke off, blushing. "I mean, I—"

Paul Tyler strolled leisurely toward Haskell. "Hi there, Verne," he murmured, embarrassed. "Dropped by to say hello and return a book to your wife."

Haskell nodded curtly. "Afternoon." He turned and

headed toward the basement door, ignoring the two of them. "I'll be downstairs."

"But Verne!" Madge protested. "What's happened?"

Verne halted briefly at the door. "I quit my job."

"You *what*?"

"I quit my job. I finished Larson off. There won't be anymore of him." The basement door slammed.

"Good Lord!" Madge shrieked, clutching at Tyler hysterically. "He's gone out of his mind!"

Down in the basement, Verne Haskel snapped on the light impatiently. He put on his engineer's cap and pulled his stool up beside the great plywood table.

What next?

Morris Home Furnishings. The big plush store. Where the clerks all looked down their noses at him.

He rubbed his hands gleefully. No more of them. No more snooty clerks, lifting their eyebrows when he came in. Only hair and bow ties and folded handkerchiefs.

He removed the model of Morris Home Furnishings and disassembled it. He worked feverishly, with frantic haste. Now that he had really begun he wasted no time. A moment later he was glueing two small buildings in its place. Ritz

Shoeshine. Pete's Bowling Alley.

Haskel giggled excitedly. Fitting extinction for the luxurious, exclusive furniture store. A shoeshine parlor and a bowling alley. Just what it deserved.

The California State Bank. He had always hated the Bank. They had once refused him a loan. He pulled the Bank loose.

Ed Tildon's mansion. His damn dog. The dog had bit him on the ankle, one afternoon. He ripped the model off. His head spun. He could do anything.

Harrison Appliance. They had sold him a bum radio. Off came Harrison Appliance.

Joe's Cigar and Smoke Shop. Joe had given him a lead quarter in May, 1949. Off came Joe's.

The Ink Works. He loathed the smell of ink. Maybe a bread factory, instead. He loved baking bread. Off came the Ink Works.

Elm Street was too dark at night. A couple of times he had stumbled. A few more streetlights were in order.

Not enough bars along High Street. Too many dress shops and expensive hat and fur shops and ladies' apparel. He ripped a whole handful loose

and carried them to the workbench.

At the top of the stairs the door opened slowly. Madge peered down, pale and frightened. "Verne?"

He scowled up impatiently. "What do you want?"

Madge came downstairs hesitantly. Behind her Doctor Tyler followed, suave and handsome in his gray suit. "Verne — is everything all right?"

"Of course."

"Did—did you really quit your job?"

Haskel nodded. He began to disassemble the Ink Works, ignoring his wife and Doctor Tyler.

"But *why*?"

Haskel grunted impatiently. "No time."

Doctor Tyler had begun to look worried. "Do I understand you're too busy for your job?"

"That's right."

"Too busy doing *what*?" Tyler's voice rose; he was trembling nervously. "Working down here on this town of yours? Changing things?"

"Go away," Haskel muttered. His deft hands were assembling a lovely little Langendorf Bread Factory. He shaped it with loving care, sprayed it with white paint,

brushed a gravel walk and shrubs in front of it. He put it aside and began on a park. A big green park. Woodland had always needed a park. It would go in place of the State Street Hotel.

Tyler pulled Madge away from the table, off in a corner of the basement. "Good God." He lit a cigarette shakily. The cigarette flipped out of his hands and rolled away. He ignored it and fumbled for another. "You see? You see what he's doing?"

Madge shook her head mutely. "What is it? I don't—"

"How long has he been working on this? All his life?"

Madge nodded, white-faced. "Yes, all his life."

Tyler's features twisted. "My God, Madge. It's enough to drive you out of your mind. I can hardly believe it. We've got to do something."

"What's happening?" Madge moaned. "What—"

"He's losing himself into it." Tyler's face was a mask of incredulous disbelief. "Faster and faster."

"He's always come down here," Madge faltered. "It's nothing new. He's always wanted to get away."

"Yes. Get away." Tyler shuddered, clenched his fists

and pulled himself together. He advanced across the basement and stopped by Verne Haskel.

"What do you want?" Haskel muttered, noticing him.

Tyler licked his lips. "You're adding some things, aren't you? New buildings."

Haskel nodded.

Tyler touched the little bread factory with shaking fingers. "What's this? Bread? Where does it go?" He moved around the table. "I don't remember any bread factory in Woodland." He whirled. "You aren't by any chance *improving* on the town? Fixing it up here and there?"

"Get the hell out of here," Haskel said, with ominous calm. "Both of you."

"Verne!" Madge squeaked.

"I've got a lot to do. You can bring sandwiches down about eleven. I hope to finish sometime tonight."

"Finish?" Tyler asked.

"Finish," Haskel answered, returning to his work.

"Come on, Madge." Tyler grabbed her and pulled her to the stairs. "Let's get out of here." He strode ahead of her, up to the stairs and into the hall. "Come on!" As soon as she was up he closed the door tightly after them.

Madge dabbed at her eyes hysterically. "He's gone crazy, Paul! What'll we do?"

Tyler was deep in thought. "Be quiet. I have to think this out." He paced back and forth, a hard scowl on his features. "I'll come soon. It won't be long, not at this rate. ^{Just} Some-time tonight."

"What? What do you mean?"

"His withdrawal. Into his substitute world. The improved model he controls. Where he can get away."

"Isn't there something we can do?"

"Do?" Tyler smiled faintly. "Do we want to do something?"

Madge gasped. "But we can't just—"

"Maybe this will solve our problem. This may be what we've been looking for." Tyler eyed Mrs. Haskel thoughtfully. "This may be just the thing."

It was after midnight, almost two o'clock in the morning, when he began to get things into final shape. He was tired—but alert. Things were happening fast. The job was almost done.

Virtually perfect.

He halted work a moment, surveying what he had accomplished. The town had

been radically changed. About ten o'clock he had begun basic structural alterations in the lay-out of the streets. He had removed most of the public buildings, the civic center and the sprawling business district around it.

He had erected a new city hall, police station, and an immense park with fountains and indirect lighting. He had cleared the slum area, the old run-down stores and houses and streets. The streets were wider and well-lit. The houses were now small and clean. The stores modern and attractive—without being ostentatious.

All advertising signs had been removed. Most of the filling stations were gone. The immense factory area was gone, too. Rolling countryside took its place. Trees and hills and green grass.

The wealthy district had been altered. There were now only a few of the mansions left—belonging to persons he looked favorably on. The rest had been cut down, turned into uniform two-bedroom dwellings, one story, with a single garage each.

The city hall was no longer an elaborate, rococo structure. Now it was low and simple, modeled after the Parthenon, a favorite of his.

There were ten or twelve persons who had done him special harm. He had altered their houses considerably. Given them war-time housing unit apartments, six to a building, at the far edge of town. Where the wind came off the bay, carrying the smell of decaying mud-flats.

Jim Larson's house was completely gone. He had erased Larson utterly. He no longer existed, not in this new Woodland—which was now almost complete.

Almost. Haskel studied his work intently. All the changes had to be made *now*. Not later. This was the time of creation. Later, when it had been finished, it could not be altered. He had to catch all the necessary changes now—or forget them.

The new Woodland looked pretty good. Clean and neat—and simple. The rich district had been toned down. The poor district had been improved. Glaring ads, signs, displays, had all been changed or removed. The business community was smaller. Parks and countryside took the place of factories. The civic center was lovely.

He added a couple of playgrounds for smaller kids. A small theater instead of the

enormous Uptown with its flashing neon sign. After some consideration he removed most of the bars he had previously constructed. The new Woodland was going to be moral. Extremely moral. Few bars, no billiards, no red light district. And there was an especially fine jail for undesirables.

The most difficult part had been the microscopic lettering on the main office door of the city hall. He had left it until last, and then painted the words with agonizing care:

Mayor

Vernon R. Haskel

A few last changes. He gave the Edwards a '39 Plymouth instead of a new Cadillac. He added more trees in the downtown district. One more fire department. One less dress shop. He had never liked taxis. On impulse, he removed the taxi stand and put in a flower shop.

Haskel rubbed his hands. Anything more? Or was it complete . . . Perfect . . . He studied each part intently. What had he overlooked?

The high school. He removed it and put in two smaller high schools, one at each end of town. Another hospital. That took almost half an hour.

He was getting tired. His hands were less swift. He mopped his forehead shakily. Anything else? He sat down on his stool wearily, to rest and think.

All done. It was complete. Joy welled up in him. A bursting cry of happiness. His work was over.

"Finished!" Verne Haskel shouted.

He got unsteadily to his feet. He closed his eyes, held his arms out, and advanced toward the plywood table. Reaching, grasping, fingers extended, Haskel headed toward it, a look of radiant exaltation on his seamed, middle-aged face.

Upstairs, Tyler and Madge heard the shout. A distant booming that rolled through the house in waves. Madge winced in terror. "What was that?"

Tyler listened intently. He heard Haskel moving below them, in the basement. Abruptly, he stubbed out his cigarette. "I think it's happened. Sooner than I expected."

"It? You mean he's—"

Tyler got quickly to his feet. "He's gone, Madge. Into his other world. We're finally free."

Madge caught his arm.

"Maybe we're making a mistake. It's so terrible. Shouldn't we—try to do something? Bring him out of it—try to pull him back."

"Bring him back?" Tyler laughed nervously. "I don't think we could, now. Even if we wanted to. It's too late." He hurried toward the basement door. "Come on."

"It's horrible." Madge shuddered and followed reluctantly. "I wish we had never got started."

Tyler halted briefly at the door. "Horrible? He's happier, where he is, now. And you're happier. The way it was, nobody was happy. This is the best thing."

He opened the basement door. Madge followed him. They moved cautiously down the stairs, into the dark, silent basement, damp with the faint night mists.

The basement was empty.

Tyler relaxed. He was overcome with dazed relief. "He's gone. Everything's okay. It worked out exactly right."

"But I don't understand," Madge repeated hopelessly, as Tyler's Buick purred along the dark, deserted streets. "Where did he go?"

"You know where he went," Tyler answered. "Into his substitute world, of course." He

screeched around a corner on two wheels. "The rest should be fairly simple. A few routine forms. There really isn't much left, now."

The night was frigid and bleak. No lights showed, except an occasional lonely streetlamp. Far off, a train whistle sounded mournfully, a dismal echo. Rows of silent houses flickered by on both sides of them.

"Where are we going?" Madge asked. She sat huddled against the door, face pale with shock and terror, shivering under her coat.

"To the police station."

"Why?"

"To report him, naturally. So they'll know he's gone. We'll have to wait; it'll be several years before he'll be declared legally dead." Tyler reached over and hugged her briefly. "We'll make out in the meantime, I'm sure."

"What if—they find him?"

Tyler shook his head angrily. He was still tense, on edge. "Don't you understand? They'll never find him—he doesn't exist. At least, not in our world. He's in his own world. You saw it. The model. The improved substitute."

"He's *there*?"

"All his life he's worked on it. Built it up. Made it real.

He brought that world into being—and now he's in it. That's what he wanted. That's why he built it. He didn't merely dream about an escape world. He actually constructed it—every bit and piece. Now he's warped himself right out of our world, into it. Out of our lives."

Madge finally began to understand. "Then he really *did* lose himself in his substitute world. You meant that, what you said about him—getting away."

"It took me awhile to realize it. The mind constructs reality. Frames it. Creates it. We all have a common reality, a common dream. But Haskell turned his back on our common reality and created his own. And he had a unique capacity—far beyond the ordinary. He devoted his whole life, his whole skill to building it. He's there now."

Tyler hesitated and frowned. He gripped the wheel tightly and increased speed. The Buick hissed along the dark street, through the silent, unmoving bleakness that was the town.

"There's only one thing," he continued presently. "One thing I don't understand."

"What is it?"

"The model. It was also

gone. I assumed he'd—shrink, I suppose. Merge with it. But the model's gone, too." Tyler shrugged. "It doesn't matter." He peered into the darkness. "We're almost there. This is Elm."

It was then Madge screamed. "*Look!*"

To the right of the car was a small, neat building. And a sign. The sign was easily visible in the darkness.

WOODLAND MORTUARY

Madge was sobbing in horror. The car roared forward, automatically guided by Tyler's numb hands. Another sign flashed by briefly, as they coasted up before the city hall.

STEUBEN PET SHOP

The city hall was lit by recessed, hidden illumination. A low, simple building, a square of glowing white. Like a marble Greek temple.

Tyler pulled the car to a halt. Then suddenly shrieked and started up again. But not soon enough.

The two shiny-black police cars came silently up around the Buick, one on each side. The four stern cops already had their hands on the door. Stepping out and coming toward him, grim and efficient.

STATEMENT

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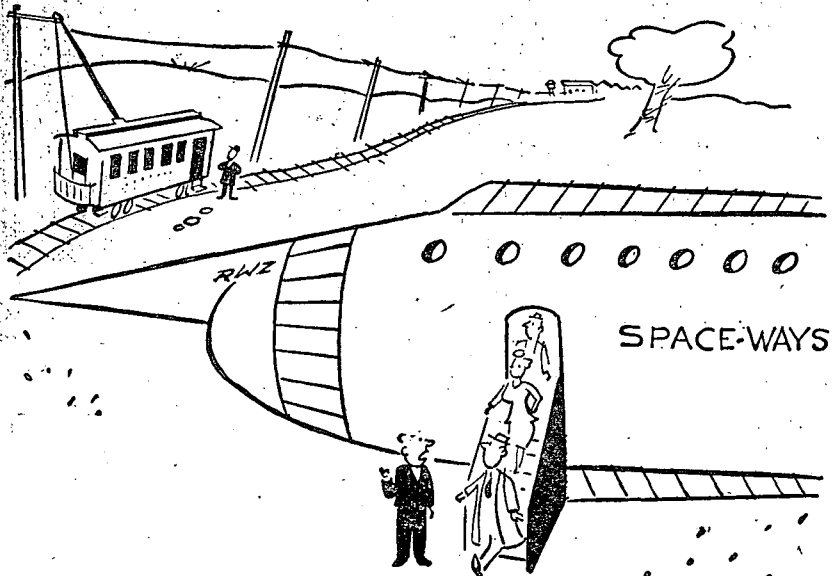
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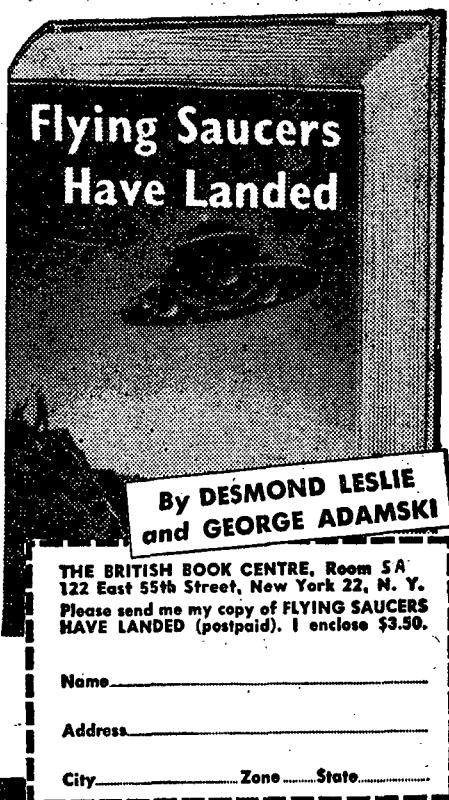
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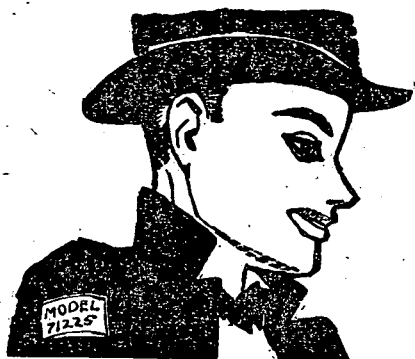


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Have it your own way

BY RICHARD WILSON

Step right up, folks! Anything your heart desires is yours for the asking. Cream on your strawberries? A chauffeur for your Rolls-Royce? Two swimming pools for your country place? That was how things seemed to shape up for our friend Benton. Pie in the sky and a blonde with a 44-inch bust.

BENTON was a pretty blasé fellow but he didn't know what to make of the girl with the forty-four-inch bust.

It made her look top-heavy because she was only about five-feet-six and she had no hips to speak of.

She had been standing in the vestibule when he opened his mailbox on his way home from work. He'd never seen her before. In fact, he'd never

seen anything like her before.

She was smiling at him as he took out his mail and so he smiled back. Why not? He approved of her eyes, which were blue, and her hair, which was long and yellow.

"Hello," he said tentatively. "You must be the new tenant in 4A."

"Yes," she said, smiling radiantly. "Do you live here too?" Her blue eyes invited.

"Well, I'm not the mail-



man," Benton grinned. "I'm in 3B," he added calculatingly. "Just a little bachelor apartment. Would you like to see it?"

Benton expected a polite demur. Instead she said, "Yes, I would."

There was a *Temporarily Out of Order* sign on the elevator which had been there for a week and as the girl preceded him up the narrow stairs he admired the long hair, the tight blue sweater, the black skirt, nylon stockings and tiny black shoes.

But he wished she hadn't accepted the invitation with such alacrity. A man will make an advance, sure, but he's thrown off balance if it's taken up immediately. There should be an interval of cat and mouse play, he thought. A decent interval. And then he thought, who is the cat and who the mouse?

He didn't know what her



game was. It might even be the badger game, with a shakedown in prospect if he misbehaved. Well, he would try not to misbehave. His estimate that the girl measured forty-four inches at the chest was a matter of wonder to him but not necessarily attraction. Sometimes there can be a great deal too much of a good thing.

She walked in when he unlocked the door, still smiling, and sat down in an armchair. Her skirt hiked up to give him a half-view of her perfect knees.

"My name is Benton," he said, closing the door. "Ed Benton. Excuse the mess. I didn't have a chance to clean up after breakfast."

He took the dirty dishes to the sink and pulled the plastic curtain that shut off the kitchenette from the living room.

She had said nothing, so he asked:

"Can I get you a drink?"

She nodded, smiling more widely. Her teeth were very white and even and her lips were rose red. She was a remarkably pretty girl, if out of proportion.

He made two drinks and handed her one.

"Here you are, uh—Miss," he said. "What is your name?"

"My name?" she said. "What would you like it to be?"

"What would I like it to be?" he echoed. "I don't know. Marilyn, maybe, or Jane, though they're not really in your class." He took a long drink. He felt baffled.

"I will be Marilyn," she said. She stopped smiling long enough to take a drink, then beamed at him again.

Benton began to feel a little high. He tried to shake it off. He'd only had part of one drink and it usually took him at least three stiff ones to begin to soar. He wondered briefly if she'd slipped something into his glass, but that wasn't possible. It had never left his hand.

He had been standing next to her chair and now he leaned over and kissed her on the mouth. It was an impulse

he had been unable to control.

She kissed him back, not aggressively, leaving her lips soft under his. It was a very satisfactory kiss.

He straightened up, said "Well!" and looked into his glass. There was a bit left. He drained it and made himself a new drink. She still had most of hers.

"Look," he said, forcing himself to keep his eyes on his glass and stirring vigorously, "what is this? Who are you? It's nice of you to drop in, and all that, but why?"

"I am Marilyn. I am a—neighbor. I have come to call. Have I done the wrong thing?"

"No, no," he said hastily. "Not at all. I just . . ."

Marilyn stood up and he thought she was about to leave. Instead she went to him, took his glass and set it down, put her arms around him, bent her head to one side and closed her eyes.

So he kissed her again. A long, long kiss, interspersed with nuzzlings and little groans.

When they stepped apart he tried to figure out what had been different. Then he had it. There was no taste. Her lipstick had no perfume,

no flavor. Nor did her hair. And now he saw that her lips were as perfect as before—as rose red and unsmeared. He wiped his own lips with his hand, but no color came off.

Of course there were supposedly kissproof lipsticks, but none of them stood up under such a kiss as they'd exchanged. It was as if her lips were permanently, indelibly red.

She took another step backward and he warned:

"Look out for the rug!"

But it was too late. It slipped out from under her and she went down, sliding along the floor. As she slid, her skirt was pushed up to her waist.

He looked with interest, then fascination. A scientific fascination. Because her nylon stockings did not end. There were no tops to them. The entire lower half of her body, from her feet to her waist, was nylon, with the stocking seams gradually disappearing into the backs of her thighs. It was not a garment she wore. She was *made* of a molded nylon plastic.

And, at the juncture of her legs with her body, she was no more anatomically defined than a doll.

Marilyn, the girl with the

forty-four-inch bust and the nylon body, looked into a full-length mirror in her bedroom in 4A.

The image was perfect, she thought, comparing it with a color photograph of a movie star after whom she'd been modeled. Better than perfect.

But Benton, after a promising beginning, hadn't been friendly at all. The way he'd looked at his watch and frowned and hurried her out of his apartment after she'd slipped on his rug. (It was tricky, this Earth gravity.) She didn't think he had an appointment at all. He was just trying to get rid of her.

She couldn't understand it. She'd been prepared to give him whatever he wanted.

She flicked a button in the center of the chest they had so carefully constructed for maximum effect, and reported:

"Scout R23 messaging. Mission unsuccessful. Details follow."

Joe Hennessy should have been remembered. He'd gone bowling with the fellows from the office after work and they'd had a few drinks. He'd been careful to put aside a dime for carfare. He had more money at home, so a dime was enough.

But now, at the subway entrance, he realized it wasn't enough. They'd just raised the fare to fifteen cents and he was a nickel short. He knew that, of course, but he'd forgotten.

Any of the fellows would have been glad to lend him a nickel, or even a dollar, if he'd thought of it in time. But they were scattered now.

Joe Hennessy supposed he could get a nickel from almost any one of the dozens of people flowing past him in the street. It'd be embarrassing, though, and he couldn't bring himself to ask. He'd also heard that a cop would be glad to help somebody out in such a fix. A cop would be better than a stranger—it'd be less like panhandling. But still he didn't like to do it. He'd always paid his own way and he didn't like to be beholden to anybody.

He was standing near the subway kiosk in indecision when the tall stranger in the pearl-gray hat approached.

"Hello," the stranger said. He was in his mid-twenties, apparently—Hennessy's age. "Can I help you, friend?"

"Oh, hello." Hennessy didn't like being approached by strangers. He was always afraid they would be panhandlers, or worse, instead of

direction-seekers. "Well, maybe you can," he said. "I need a nickel for the subway."

He began to tell how he usually had more than enough money, and about the bowling with the fellows from the office, but the stranger stopped him with a smile and a gesture of his hand.

"No need to explain. I understand. I am very glad to be of assistance. Here."

The stranger thrust a hand into his side coat pocket and brought out a sheaf of bills. They were fresh and bright and clung together as if they'd just come from the mint. The stranger took one off the top and offered it to Hennessy.

"Oh, I don't need a dollar," Hennessy said. "Just a nickel. You see, I—"

That was when he saw what the bill was. It had a neat "500" in each of the corners visible to him and an unfamiliar picture in the middle.

Hennessy felt his mouth drop open. The stranger was standing patiently, smiling, a five-hundred-dollar bill in one hand and an inch-thick stack of them in the other, waiting for Hennessy to accept the bill.

"Look" Hennessy said, his voice rising to a treble, "I don't know what this is all about. I only want a nickel for

the subway. That's all. Just a nickel. I don't—"

Suddenly he couldn't stand it any more. The stranger's smile and the fortune he held so casually in his hands seemed evil.

Hennessy fled. Away from the stranger, away from the subway kiosk, half running, clutching his lone dime in his sweating hand.

The man in the pearl-gray hat sat at the desk in his room and regarded the bills piled in front of him. He took more bills out of various pockets and stacked them up with the others.

"Why did he run?" he asked himself. "I was only trying to help him. He wanted money and that is what I offered to him."

He took a bill in his fingers and examined it, comparing it with another one he took from his vest pocket.

"I thought they were perfect," he said. "But there must be something wrong with them."

He sighed, scooped together the five hundred million dollars and shoved it into the fireplace. He touched a match to it here and there. It burned very well.

He stood up and touched a button on his chest.

"Scout R67 reporting. Mission unsuccessful. Details follow."

The Politician prided himself on being accessible. He was especially accessible when he was out of office.

So he said he would be very glad to see Mr. Bang.

"Have I got the name right?" he asked his receptionist over the interoffice phone. "Bang?"

"Yes, sir," she said. "Mr. Bang. He didn't give a first name."

"Well, send him in."

The Politician got up and leaned across his big oak desk to shake hands.

"Very glad to see you, Mr. Bang. Very glad indeed."

Mr. Bang sat his thick, prosperous-looking bulk in the visitor's chair.

"I understand," he said without preamble, "that you would like to be Governor."

"Well, now, ha, ha," the Politician said, thrown off balance. "You might say rather, my dear Mr. Bang, that it is my desire to serve the people of this great State to the best of my poor talents, in whatever capacity they choose to install me."

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Bang. "But you should not be unhappy if they were to in-

stall you as Governor. At least, that is my information."

"Mr. Bang," the Politician said, dropping his voice and leaning across the desk, "I don't know who you are, but I can tell this much—you are a man of political acuity. Have a cigar—and a drink, perhaps?—while we discuss this matter." He picked up the phone. "Miss Grant, I don't wish to be disturbed for the next half hour."

Mr. Bang accepted the cigar and the liquor and then, dropping his voice to the conspiratorial level the Politician had adopted, said.

"I can make you Governor."

"You are aware, I suppose, that the other party is in power; that the present Governor has no intention of stepping down, and that the election is better than two years away?"

"Petty details," said Mr. Bang, waving them away with the pudgy hand that held the cigar. "If his Excellency the Governor were to die tomorrow, who would succeed him?"

"The Lieutenant Governor, of course."

"Precisely. And is it not true that the Lieutenant Governor is an aging man who is happy to have the prestige of his subsidiary office but

who would be dismayed by the responsibility and hard work of the Governorship? Would he not step down?"

"Well, yes, I have heard that said."

"I can guarantee it," Mr. Bang said. "And does not the State constitution provide that if the Governorship is vacated by death and if the Lieutenant Governor is not available to succeed him, there must be a special election?"

"Ah!" said the Politician. "That is true. And I could win a special election hands down. The other party doesn't have anybody but a bunch of hacks available at this time." He smiled to himself. But then he frowned.

"We overlook one item in this little game of supposition, Mr. Bang. The Governor happens to be a young man of forty-three, in the best of health. He is not going to die tomorrow, and probably not for the next quarter century."

"He will die tomorrow," said Mr. Bang positively, "if you wish me to arrange it for you."

"My dear sir!" said the Politician. He seemed genuinely shocked.

"It will look like a heart attack and no suspicion will attach itself to anyone—least of all to you."

The Politician stood up, quivering with outraged dignity. "Get out, sir!" he boomed. "Leave my office at once before I call the police! Of all the underhanded tricks! I knew the Governor was a shrewd operator, but I didn't believe he would stoop to such means to discredit me. Out, sir!"

Mr. Bang stood up in confusion.

"This is no trick," he said. "I can make you Governor. It is your great desire. And from the Governorship it is but a step to the Presidency, as you know."

The Politician snapped on the interoffice phone. "Miss Grant, I want you to hear this, too. . . . Leave my office immediately, Mr. Bang, or whatever your name is. And tell your friend the Governor that I refused to fall for his outrageous trap. And that if he ever dares even to allude to it, I shall ruin him by spreading the truth from one end of the State to the other!"

Mr. Bang opened his mouth, then closed it again. He put down the cigar, then turned and left, a very puzzled man.

The heavy-set Mr. Bang reasoned later than his failure to interest the Politician in the Governorship must be

traced to insufficient information. Years had been spent in gathering facts but somewhere they had overlooked something. These people who on the surface seemed to have no scruples whatever apparently had a strongly-developed moral sense deep inside them which caused them to react entirely unpredictably.

Mr. Bang snapped on his communicator:

"Scout R9 reporting. Mission unsuccessful. Details follow."

They had met in a fancy cocktail lounge—the sultry girl in the gold lamé gown and the distinguished gentleman with the touch of gray at his temples—and now they were in his penthouse apartment drinking twenty-five-year-old Scotch.

"I've never met a man like you," the girl said, looking at him invitingly under her long, curving eyelashes. "So distinguished—so witty—so *je ne sais quoi*."

"You embarrass me, my dear," he said. "It is I who should pay you the compliments. But compliments are such empty things. Unlike this, for instance."

And he handed her a string of perfectly-matched pearls.

Then he went to a closet and returned with a coat of exquisite fur.

"Or this," he said. "Sable—what mink only pretends to be."

She exclaimed delightedly and hugged the gifts to her. Then she threw them aside and said:

"Though I value them because they are from you, they are only material things. There are more important things." She stepped close to him, her arms at her sides, her chest high, her head back. "There is you—and me. I cannot resist you. Take me. I am yours."

His arm went to circle her waist. But then he stopped. A quizzical look crept across his face.

"Something is wrong," he said. "Haven't we met before?"

She had begun to lean toward him, but now she hesitated.

"I have that feeling, too." She smiled and looked at him closely. She touched his chest over the gleaming white starched shirt.

"That's right," he said. "We have met—in the maintenance depot. And you've found my communication switch. I see yours, too—" he touched it, midway down the deep V of

her gown—"cleverly disguised as a fetching little mole. You're . . ."

"Scout R84," she laughed. "Reporting another failure. And you?"

"R206," he said. "Humiliating, isn't it?"

The Coordinator on duty looked disgustedly at the compilation, especially at the last entry which showed that robot scouts 84 and 206 not only failed in their mission among the III Solians but had ended up trying to give things away to each other.

Project Friendship, it had been called euphemistically. Among themselves the Coordinators referred to it as the Giveaway Program, or Give and Then Take.

But so far—and III Sol was the fifth planet in as many solar systems where they'd tried out the project—they hadn't even been able to give.

The Chief would not be pleased. The Chief had devoted a lifetime to the study of beings such as those on the green planet—"human" beings whose numbers were such that they could not be conquered from without but had to be subverted from within.

The Chief's study had

shown that the beings had three main drives — sex, money and power. So it had seemed perfectly clear that the way to gain their friendship was to exploit these factors to the fullest. Then, having won their friendship, it would be a simple matter to take over the planet.

But it hadn't worked. There were other intangibles ticking away in these tall bipeds of III Sol. Suspicion was one and he imagined that honor was another.

It hadn't worked, the Coordinator knew from having watched five projects fail, because the Chief hadn't learned from experience. The Coordinators had, but the Chief wouldn't listen to them. Nobody could tell him anything. He'd worked out his plan a century ago, he'd got the Masters' approval, and he'd followed it blindly ever since.

The III Solians had a slogan for people like his Chief, the Coordinator remembered from one of the robots' reports—You can't teach an old dog new spots. Something like that. The Chief hadn't even modified the robots where the Coordinators had showed him they were imperfect.

The Coordinator sighed. He looked again at the panel with its thousand lights—each

ruby glow representing a scout that had failed, and not a single amber one to show even a partial success.

With what he knew now, if given the chance, he might be able to accomplish something where the Chief's obstinacy had made it impossible. He was sure he could. Why not take the chance? Why not experiment?

The Coordinator stopped sighing and straightened up purposefully.

Then, when the Chief came in to have a look at the panel, the Coordinator decorporeated him with a neat blast from the hip.

He exulted, and recalled another phrase from III Sol.

"The Chief is dead, long live the Chief!" he cried as the old Chief vanished into molecules.

The new Chief flicked on all circuits and announced his accession to leadership.

Then he set the communicator to III Sol humming.

"Attention all scouts!" he commanded. "Attention all scouts! Stand by for modification instructions."

"Feminoids will immediately reduce circumferential chest measurements by eight inches. Object realism. Further modifications will be

made at your next visit to the maintenance depot.

"Masculoids will. . . ."

Marilyn, known also as Scout R23, now an attractive but unspectacular size 36, came out of the maintenance depot feeling like a new woman. In fact, she felt like a woman for the first time.

She flushed enjoyably when two sailors whistled at her as they passed. She didn't turn to look, much less go after them, as she would have before modification.

She walked on along the busy street. She had no trouble with the gravity now, having been rearranged internally, and was able to step nimbly aside when a fat woman came unexpectedly out of a department store entrance.

There was a waft of perfume as the woman swept by. Marilyn stopped, then went into the store on impulse, to buy a flagon of perfume for herself.

On the way in she picked a last name off the door.

She was Marilyn Macy now.

Within six months she had a husband and a different last name. Occasionally, during the early part of their marriage, she heard vague murmurings just outside her ear. The murmurings seemed to

have a desperation to them and if she paid close attention she could pretty easily make out the words:

"Attention all scouts! Imperative, repeat imperative, that you report activities. Non-reporting is a violation punishable under Robot Code A. . . ."

But in time the murmurings became vaguer and more distant. Then, one day, they had ceased altogether.

For some years many of the other nine hundred and ninety-nine ex-robots held on annual get-together, traveling to it from the cities and towns to which they had been assigned. They called themselves the Robot Society and at first there were two factions, the Fundamentalists and the Integrationists. The Fundamentalists were always getting up resolutions and manifestoes and having grim debates about duty and conscience, while the Integrationists had parties in each other's rooms. It wasn't long before the Fundamentalists realized what they were missing and, in one last resolution, shortened their name to the first syllable, then voted to Integrate.

Gradually attendance at the get-togethers declined and one

year nobody showed up at all. . . .

The ex-robot with the pearl gray hat bought himself a more fashionable homburg and other clothing to go with it. He drew another five hundred million dollars from the maintenance depot but this time he didn't attempt to give it away.

He chose a good solid name, Van Renssalaer Whitney, told the yacht salesman he was distantly related to the Whitneys, hired a crew for the yacht and sailed off for Mexico by way of the Horn.

Mr. V. R. Whitney now lives extremely well at Aca-pulco. He still hears voices occasionally but he's forgotten what they mean. Twice a month he visits a good analyst who frankly admits he doesn't know what they mean either but who feels that Mr. Whitney is making a good adjustment to them.

In a penthouse apartment with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of twenty-five-year-old Scotch a distinguished gentleman and a ravishingly beautiful girl are living happy, completely useless lives. When they hear the voices begin they put a jazz record on the custom-built phonograph with the hi-fi and

binaural sound, turn up the volume and have a drink.

Mr. Bang evolved by rapid stages into Congressman Banghart J. Carew. He represents a safe district and with reasonable luck he expects to be a Senator before too many years have passed. He doesn't want to be Governor himself, but there's an honest, hard-working Assistant District Attorney he considers his protégé, who is beginning to make a name for himself as a racket-buster and is fine gubernatorial timber.

Congressman B. J. Carew once ran into a prominent politician at a testimonial dinner and the politician looked at him quite sharply for a moment, but then shook his head and turned away.

The Congressman is well-liked in Washington. But occasionally, as he sits in the House of Representatives, he will hear a whispering near his ear and then he will ask leave to make a one-minute speech, and this drowns out the whisperings.

He almost always speaks against immigration, denouncing bigger quotas for aliens, and the liberal groups who support him can't understand this one blot on an otherwise brilliant and distinguished record.

WINDOW to the WEST

BY VERN FEARING

This N. Muna—he was a queer one indeed. When he painted a seascape and hung it in a museum, you got wet looking at it. He got money for paintings not yet dreamed of and then took his sponsors for a joy-ride that gave them far more than their money's worth.

IT WAS almost closing time when Nicolas Muna came into the Neustadt-Kingsland Gallery. He walked quickly, but with growing irresolution, ignoring rows of paintings on either side, and his pace slowed as he approached an alcove at the far end of the gallery. At the entrance he paused, looked about, and confirming that he was alone and unobserved, put on a pair of smoked glasses and went in.

Opposite him, fifteen feet across the alcove, hung a painting listed in the catalogue as *Window To The West, by N. Muna*. It showed a latticed window and a view seen through its numerous

panes; a view of a shore, white sand, green sea, red sky. Because it occupied a wall by itself, and because it was hung low enough to foster the illusion, it seemed to be a real window—but one that gave on a scene no human eyes had ever beheld, except for Muna.

He was a tall, bony man, with a shock of shining black hair as wild as a mane. His eyes were dead, deep in their sockets behind black lenses, his mouth a line, but his clasped hands—hands, considering his loose white suit and tennis shoes, incongruously encased in chamois gloves—were alive, tormented, the long fingers locked in



a struggle, slowly pulling apart.

Now he came closer. Suddenly he tore away his glasses. His dark eyes roamed the canvas with rapture.

The glowing pigments, ordered and divided by the black lattice-work, achieved the unearthly beauty of a stained glass window . . . but the same lattices kept the elements of the larger scene from fusing . . . became, indeed, bars through which one might gaze at an alien world forever beyond attainment. . . .

But the seascape was receding. Sky and sand and sea were rushing into the frame. The frame began to grow, larger and larger still, until it was gone and Muna stood alone on the shore, looking down to a cold and lifeless sea.

The sun was lost in white haze, the waves hung frozen. White on the white sand lay the skull of an albatross. Beside it stood a monstrous turtle, its shell banded black marble, the carapace cut with infinite facets. The turtle's head was drawn into the shell, but the terrifying, gleaming red jewels that were its eyes were open. The eyes, Muna knew, had fire in them.

In a moment it was done, and Muna turned and ran.

Out of solicitude for Nicolas Muna, the sea-going *Anenome IV* had been anchored short of her dock, well out in the cove. This was meant to keep sounds of a party aboard the yacht from disturbing the peace of a villa that stood among pines, overlooking the cove. The villa, a luxurious lodge of marine feeling, on grounds that included several out buildings, one of which Muna occupied, was named *Land's End*. Its owner, Avery Kingsland, loved the place; it was his favorite vacation residence, as home base for his yacht. But, because of Muna, not once during the long summer now ending had the *Anenome IV* put in here, or Kingsland set foot on the property.

These circumstances, and related matters of a far stranger character were presently being discussed by Kingsland and one of his guests on the yacht. The others aboard were making the most of their holiday, within bounds, swimming, diving from the bowsprit, sunbathing topside in advanced stages of somnolence and nudity, or sharing the comforts of an awninged afterdeck and its powerful bar.

Among the drinkers,

though separated for privacy, were Kingsland and his guest, an Englishman named Peter St. Pons. The two were vastly dissimilar. St. Pons was portly, ponderous, more a large mammal than a man, wearing gaudy tropical play clothes over a skin innocent of undue exposure to sun. Kingsland was slight, nervously handsome, glass-in-hand a nautical man of distinction, impeccable in manner and dress. His speech was something else again.

"Find out what that wild man thinks he's up to," said Kingsland. "Find out, that's all I ask, and I'll deal with him. . . . I've done what I can to make it easier for you—this whole weekend was arranged just to let you get at him—but it won't be easy."

"Here's luck," said St. Pons. "... Who did you say I was?"

"An art critic from London, feature writer and so forth."

"Really? How did it sit with him?"

"I don't know. I don't understand Muna. He's an odd combination, a simple Mexican from the hills, and a hot, educated young intellectual. But you're supposed to be something of a specialist in the, ah, the art field, aren't you? You'll get along. Just let

him know you despise rich Americans."

"I see. . . ."

"He says I haven't any feeling for art. How the hell am I expected to feel? I have an equity in everything he produces. If he destroys a painting he doesn't like, he's inflicting a property loss on me, isn't he?"

"Exactly."

"I discovered him. Last November, in Mexico. I discovered him and brought him to New York. When he said he couldn't work there, I took him up here to the Cape. He was only supposed to use one of the cottages—I'd rebuilt it for him as a studio—but the way he carried on when I used *Land's End* once last May, he's had sole occupancy since he got here in February. And what have I to show for my investment? A handful of canvases he brought from Mexico, and after that just one—the one he set on fire in the gallery."

A steward brought fresh drinks. Kingsland sampled his morosely, St. Pons with relish, after which he said, "May I ask about your contract with Muna? Doesn't it call for a specified number of paintings within a specified time?"

Kingsland gestured im-

patiently. "You can't talk to him about things like that. He says, 'Paintings are not potatoes' and that's it. Besides, it's unnecessary. Muna is prolific. He's a genius; I believe that no matter what he does; but what good does it do him, or me, or anyone, if he burns up everything he doesn't like?"

"Is that what he says?—he doesn't like them?"

"No, that's not at all what he says. He says they catch fire by themselves."

"I beg your pardon?" said St. Pons, startled.

"That's what he says," said Kingsland. "Remember, this is all by telephone; I haven't seen him since May. He phoned me in New York on August fourth, as I well remember, and simply told me his paintings — everything he'd done—had caught fire by themselves and been consumed. What was more, he warned me that *Window To The West* was potentially dangerous—his words—and that if I didn't burn it myself, it was liable to happen spontaneously."

"Spontaneously indeed," St. Pons murmured. "What did you say?"

"I was stunned. Months of work wiped out, and here he was telling me to do away

with the one painting I had—which he hadn't actually given me, to begin with. It was the only one he'd show me when I was here, so I just took it along and—"

"May I break in? You say *Window To The West* was the only painting he'd show you? Then you saw nothing of those later burned?"

"Not a glimpse. He refused, said they weren't ready to show."

"And how did he react to your taking the painting?"

"Annoyance . . . anger . . . he said he hadn't decided whether he'd finished working on it. I promised not to show it before he saw it again. . . . I wish you could have seen it," Kingsland said, his eyes half closed as though to conjure up the image. "A masterpiece. But I didn't show it. For three months I kept thinking I'd wait until I had more, possibly of equal caliber, and I'd hang them together. . . ."

"When did you hang it, Mr. Kingsland?"

"The week after Muna told me the others had burned. August tenth, a Monday. I thought about what he'd said, about his warning. . . ." Kingsland finished the sentence by shaking his head. "I wanted to see what it would

stir up if I hung it just for a few days, without any fanfare. The next day, before anyone worthwhile even knew about it, Muna showed up at the gallery."

"Found out rather quickly, didn't he?"

"Apparently."

"Hmmm," said St. Pons, looking very wise. "And what did he say about that little incendiary visit? How does he reconcile it with his talk about," he smiled faintly, "spontaneous combustion?"

"It proved his point," said Kingsland wearily.

"I beg your pardon?"

"All he had to say when I called him was, 'Mr. Kingsland, I tried to warn you.' Period."

"But his presence at the gallery? . . . Isn't he aware he was seen?—that it's known he deliberately set fire to the painting?"

"I haven't discussed it. Not a word."

"May I ask why not, Mr. Kingsland?"

"Look at it my way, St. Pons. Am I going to prosecute him for it? I am not. You know painters, you know how they can go through a new phase, absolutely dedicated, then suddenly it's over and they're sick of it? . . . You find them painting over on the

same canvas, slicing up big ones to make small ones. . . ."

He sighed heavily. "My interest lies in preserving our relationship, if possible. My hope is that it was a phase, that he's through destroying his work. Even part of the output of a genius is plenty, but I don't know . . . I don't know. . . . He stopped talking to watch a group of sun worshippers descend from the upper deck.

One of them, a darkhaired young woman in a bikini, very well put together, came walking over to Kingsland and St. Pons.

" . . . Dolores, my dear, will you join us? Have you two met?"

"Oh yes, Mr. St. Pons? Don't make room for me, I'm not staying." Her voice was husky, and from her accent and the cast of her features—high, polished cheekbones, sloe eyes; a lovely face—St. Pons guessed she was Mexican. "Just one drink," she said. "We're going motor-boating."

"No, no," said Kingsland in dismay. "Please, no motor-boating. I promised Muna absolute quiet during his working hours."

"But he isn't working. Look, see him out there?"

Kingsland focussed a pair of binoculars on a tall, spare figure slowly ambling along the shore. "You're right. Care to use these, St. Pons? Dolores, my pet, what shall it be?"

"Absinthe."

"Isn't it somewhat early in—"

"Absinthe!"

"... All right." He called the steward.

"Striking fellow," said St. Pons, putting down the binoculars. "Marvelous head, good bones."

"Are you a painter too, Mr. St. Pons?"

The Englishman beamed. "A Sunday painter, Miss Chilon."

"Oh, they're the best kind. But I mean it. They paint for enjoyment. When they approach a canvas, it's fun, not life or death. I don't ever want to meet another man who can't wait until Sunday to paint... or the Sunday after, if there's something better to do." She took her drink, downed it quickly, then picked up the binoculars and looked out at Muna. "He's sitting on a rock now," she said. "How thin he looks—how very tired and drawn..."

Abruptly she pulled the glasses away from her eyes, furious.

"What's the matter, my dear?"

"He has a telescope! He was looking right at me and laughing!"

Both men smiled and relaxed. "What of it?" said Kingsland.

"Nothing! The fool! — laughing! ... Good-bye, I'm going. ..."

"Have fun," said Kingsland.

"Yes, do," said St. Pons, and when his eyes returned from following her across the deck, he said, "Attractive," and had a long pull at his gin.

"... Well, St. Pons, anything else?"

"As a matter of fact, sir, I've been wondering. Is it possible Muna's reason for showing you only one painting was that, actually, he had no others? You seem surprised; allow me to continue. Do I assume correctly that your arrangement with Muna includes fairly sizeable advances of money against future sales?" When Kingsland nodded yes (more than surprised, he seemed wrenched, unhappily, from other thoughts), St. Pons asked, "And these advances have not been cut off, have they?"

"No. ... What are you getting at?"

"Simply this: if Muna had

no other paintings, he could cover up by claiming they were lost in a fire, and keep getting his money."

"Come now, St. Pons. Muna had been here months. Why shouldn't there have been other paintings?"

"Oh, I don't know. . . . Painters have sterile phases, too."

"Not Muna," said Kingsland with finality. "He'd have left here long ago. Paint is Muna's life."

St. Pons smiled wanly. "Not a Sunday painter, I take it?"

Kingsland glanced quickly, searchingly, at the Englishman, then said in level tones, "Dolores Chilon was Muna's fiancee at one time. . . . Anyone who knows Muna knows he must paint. You're way off base, St. Pons." He paused, then added, with unexpected sharpness, "What about a painting we know he burned? Was that done to alibi a lack of productivity?"

"No, sir, to bolster an alibi, possibly. You see, Mr. Kingsland, in a case like this, where Lloyds has insured an artist's work, sight unseen, it's important to establish that the work did exist."

"But what difference does it make? I haven't claimed damages at all, for anything.

I don't want the slightest breath of bad publicity for Muna. I notified Lloyds because I am legally obligated to do so, and while I welcome your company's investigation, I am perfectly willing to sign a waiver and cancel this policy outright."

"Fair enough, Mr. Kingsland," said St. Pons mildly, "but there remains the question of Lloyds continuing insurance on your other properties. What if Muna had burned down the gallery? Similarly, if there was indeed a fire at *Land's End*, the threat of loss concerns us. Lloyds is uneasy about clients playing with fire. I hope you understand."

Kingsland nodded and looked over the rail. The motorboat was circling the yacht. Dolores Chilon sat in the bow, in her bikini, like a figurehead, and neither man seemed disposed to carry on further talk. Presently St. Pons produced a pen and a small red notebook, and began to make coded entries.

By nightfall the party from the *Anenome IV* was ashore. It had expanded considerably. Reinforcements had come by land and sea; from Provincetown, mostly on bicycles and in small European sports

cars; a boatload from Race Point, and two station wagons from New York. The guests were divisible by half a dozen types, as though turned out in a nearby ceramics factory which had a wide, though not local, reputation for hand work. They wore everything from milkhands' attire to formal costume, and among them were to be found people from book houses, ad agencies, show business, magazines, such as writers, photographers, set designers, models, directors, musicians, producers, with the usual heavy sprinkling of moochers, loafers, nuts and bums.

An orchestra furnished noise, an exclusive catering service furnished everything else, including detectives to watch the silver. The conversation went something like this:

HE: (Tall, young, bald, glasses, sack suit): "I wonder what that is they're preparing to roast in the barbecue pit?"

SHE: (Sandals, pony-tail, pedal-pushers): "It's either a small calf or a large dog."

Another sample:

HE: (Beard, blue jeans): "Why is Margo crying?"

SHE: (Dirndl, pigtails, barefoot): "Her psychiatrist won't dance with her."

Still another:

HE: (100% Orlon): "Frantic ball, huh, sweetie?"

SHE: (Strapless): "Crazy."

This one too:

AVERY KINGSLAND: (Cummerbund): "I wish you'd cut down on your drinking just enough to make it possible to dance with you."

DOLORES CHILON: (Taffeta): "If I didn't have to dance with you, I wouldn't drink so much."

"That's a hell of a thing to say to me," said Kingsland.

"I'm in a hell of a mood," said Dolores.

"Well, you wanted to come," said Kingsland.

He saw St. Pons beckoning from the sidelines, then go out on the terrace. He maneuvered Dolores off the floor, took her outside and sat her down. Then he lit a cigarette for her and joined St. Pons twenty feet away.

"Mr. Kingsland, I hate to be relentless, but I can't seem to locate Muna anywhere."

"Well, what can I do? Keep looking."

"Yes . . . The fact is, I thought Miss Chilon might know . . ."

"What gave you that idea?"

"They were together earlier, so— Have I offended you, sir?"

"You have not. When was this?"

"About an hour and a half ago."

"I didn't know," said Kingsland. "I'll ask her." He went back to Dolores. She had found a drink on the terrace. They spoke briefly, then Kingsland returned to St. Pons. "Nothing," he said. "Just nose around. He's around here somewhere."

"You don't think he's left the premises?"

"I don't see why he should. The party's here."

"Somebody's making a fire on the beach out there," said St. Pons.

Kingsland turned and saw a small blaze far down the shore, where it curved out to sea to become the north side of the cove. It flared up for a moment and died. Again it shot up, and again it went out.

They waited expectantly, but nothing happened . . .

Dolores Chilon came toward them, sliding a hand along the rail to steady herself. "Who wants Muna?" she asked. "Do you want Muna, Mr. St. Peter?"

"I'm anxious to meet him, Miss Chilon."

"That's good, that's fine, because I don't want to meet him . . . You go meet him and tell him I said go to hell."

"I'll be glad to, Miss Chilon."

Do you know where he is?"

"He's waiting down there." She pointed vaguely. "Where the little fire was just now. Tell him what I said . . . Tell him it's too late . . . too . . ." She began to cry, very quietly.

"I'm sorry," said St. Pons. He nodded politely, walked to center of the terrace, and descended a stone stairway to the beach.

Kingsland stood there, patient, martyred, his handsome face twitching, making no move to touch the girl, waiting for her to stop.

The night was moonless, dark, and St. Pons had difficulty reaching his objective. The scalloped shoreline made it hazardous to estimate how far up the roaring, foaming surf might reach; the alternative to wet feet was sand in his shoes; St. Pons didn't like it, moreover, there was a chill in the air. But he was spurred on and heartened when, halfway there, for the third time a fire started up, and this time it lasted.

He found Muna in the lee of a grassy promontory, in a hollow between the beach and high dunes. "Hello, Mr. Muna," he said, crossing the perimeter of the firelit area.

"Hello," said Muna. "Who are you?"

He was sitting on a section of a huge, bleached log, dressed in sports clothes, looking very neat and bright. The fire made his skin gleam and brought excitement to his eyes. He did not attempt to get up.

"My name is St. Pons. Mr. Kingsland spoke of me, I expect?"

"From London?—the critical writer? I remember." He extended a relaxed friendly hand, and for the first time St. Pons noticed that he was wearing soiled chamois gloves. "I saw you this afternoon on the boat with Mr. Kingsland and Lola Chilon."

"Yes, I saw you too. As a matter of fact, I have a message for you from Miss Chilon. She asked me to say she isn't coming."

Muna laughed. "That's all?" he said sadly. "I knew that."

"Well," said St. Pons indefinitely, and shifted his stance. He took out a cigarette case, offered one to Muna, lit both, and felt better equipped to linger without imposing.

"She's drunk, huh?" said Muna.

St. Pons smiled. "I'm a lenient judge, Mr. Muna. I believe in being charitable."

"That's good," said Muna.

"Do you mind if I sit

down?" asked St. Pons. "I'd like to cozy up a bit before I start back."

"You are welcome, Mr. St. Pons. To share a fire is the basis of hospitality. What is the name of this brand?"

"Three Castles."

"Too sweet."

"Matter of taste. To me, Mexican cigarettes taste like Burma cheroots."

"I must try them. How do you know about Mexican cigarettes?"

"I've been to Mexico. I'm a student of Mexican art."

"Do you know where Villahermosa is?"

"Yes, but I haven't been there. It's down in Yucatan?"

"No, in Tabasco, but that's close enough. I come from Villahermosa. It's wonderful there, not like here, so cold, you can feel the winter coming, it's in the wind." He took a deep breath and nodded in confirmation. "The air is changing. Tell me, whose work do you know?"

"Anguiano, Mendez, Charlot . . . Pena, Lugo . . . Aguirre, Zalce . . ."

"That's wonderful! That's very nice. Do you buy paintings?"

"When I can afford them . . . May I add that I've been hoping to see some of your work too, Mr. Muna?"

"Thank you," said Muna, graciously, sadly. "But I'm not a Mexican painter anymore. I am a Yankee. I live here where the ocean is wild and cold, and there is ice. I eat boiled potatoes, and I have winter underwear."

"Yes, but your art must still be essentially Mexican."

"That's what you think," said Muna.

St. Pons hesitated, then said resolutely, "That's a very provocative idea. There may be a good article in this."

"No," said Muna, "I don't think so. A painting is to be seen. Writing about painting is like painting about writing. When you write about me, you say what you think I am, not what I am. Only my painting says what I am."

St. Pons was silent. The fire had burned down, and Muna rose to feed it from a heap of driftwood and dry brush. It shot up with a roar and a shower of sparks. Muna followed their flight, then threw on some small logs and poked them into position with a charred stick. St. Pons pulled back from the heat.

"... Isn't the wind a bit too vigorous for this?"

"I'm very careful," said Muna. "Fire is my element."

"Your element," St. Pons

repeated quietly. "How do you mean?"

It was a moment before Muna spoke, turning slowly from his contemplation of the flames to St. Pons. "There are four elements," he said. "The earth, the air above it, the water around it, and inside it—fire. Each element is a separate world, each has its inhabitants. All people are related to one of these elements, sometimes more, sometimes less, but always more to one element than to the others? ... Do you know what I am trying to say?"

"Y-e-e-s, rather, except possibly about each element having its own inhabitants ... I suppose we'd say birds, animals and fish—leaving out other forms of life—inhabit the first three elements, but what about fire?"

"Fire is different," said Muna. "Fire is not only an element, it also inhabits the element. It's as if to say that air was an element in which nothing could live, except the air itself."

"But, Mr. Muna, you can't just say that the air has life?"

"Not air, no, but fire has life."

"... Are you speaking of life in the sense of a living organism, capable of re-

sponse, movement, nutrition, growth, reproduction? . . ."

"Fire is alive," said Muna. "Right now, we three are alive here—you and me and the fire. I do not say it does not fulfill your laws, but fire has its own laws. You know scientists say the only difference between living and non-living systems is entirely one of complexity . . . but the complexity of this system, of fire, is not understood, except by those whose element it is."

"Are there many?"

"I don't know. Perhaps this is something I have yet to find out. It is only a few months that I myself have come to understand fire."

"How does one come to this understanding?"

"Fire chooses to tell them."

"You mean it has an intelligence that communicates with people?"

"Yes."

"With you?"

"Yes." Muna smiled suddenly. "Lola Chilon is coming."

Both men looked toward the house. Swimming in light, high on a hill, it gave the impression of hanging in the sky, until one perceived there were stars above and to either side of the house, but none below. Indeed, the dark-

ness between them and the house was impenetrable.

"How do you know?" asked St. Pons, getting up.

"The fire told me," said Muna.

The next moment the Englishman started violently as a woman's voice, not far away, called out in fright, "Nico! Nico!"

Muna said, "It has been very pleasant to meet you, Mr. St. Pons," and walked out into the darkness, toward the voice.

But St. Pons had quickly recovered his composure and purpose; as Muna walked off parallel to the shore, St. Pons struck sharply inland; when he had gone a short distance, he stopped and looked back. He could hear the girl sobbing. The fire was cut off from view by the dunes, but blue reflected flickers of light rippled the taffeta of her gown as Dolores Chilon appeared, with Muna. Then they too were below St. Pons' level of vision. He began circling back, through an area studded with clumps of beach grass, where his dark tweeds were less conspicuous seen against the sand.

He had not gone very far before he discovered that someone else was stalking the

same quarry. Because they were moving as though coming down different spokes of a wheel to its hub, St. Pons was forced to let the other get relatively closer, or risk being seen himself. He watched his rival crawl up the dunes until it was evident he could peer down from the summit. Minutes passed. St. Pons considered his position—a risky, uncomfortable, unhappy position it was—where he could neither hear nor see anything; and whether it was wiser to withdraw . . . and he might have done so if it had not been for the extraordinary color the air around the knoll had taken on.

It was fantastic—a soft halo of transparent violet light that hung like a veil in midair. What was more, the phenomenon had evidently made the other man raise his head, and in the violet light St. Pons saw that his companion in snooping was Avery Kingsland.

Then three things happened almost together: Kingsland stood up on top of the dunes, Dolores Chilon screamed, and the violet haze turned to smoke and was instantly whipped away by the wind.

When Kingsland then de-

scended the slope to the other side, St. Pons scrambled forward to take the spot just vacated. He reached his point of vantage just in time to see Muna walking away, heading back toward the house. Dolores was sitting in the sand, staring into the fire. Kingsland was standing close by, looking after Muna.

St. Pons swiftly turned his attention to the fire, hoping to find something that would at once explain what he had seen, but there were the logs, the brush, the gnarled driftwood, being normally consumed, otherwise unchanged, crackling peacefully among docile flames.

“Shall I take you back to the house now?” said Kingsland.

“No,” said the girl, “I’ll go back alone.” She had apparently sobered; from her drawn face and lusterless eyes, St. Pons surmised she had made a hasty transition to the hangover stage. Shivering, she rose, but stopped Kingsland from wrapping his dinner jacket around her shoulders. Something in his expression made her seek out his hand momentarily. “I’m sorry, Avery,” she said softly. “I thought I could tell him, but I can’t . . .”

She turned to go, and

Kingsland overtook her and put his arms around her from behind. He started to speak, but never got past the first syllable, as suddenly the fire erupted with a blinding white effulgence. Kingsland and Dolores had their backs to it, and saw only the instantaneous light around them, but St. Pons caught the flash itself, though at an angle. Instinctively he covered his head, his brain spinning rings of light, still seeing the last image before he ducked—the picture of Kingsland falling to his knees, a fraction of a second after the silent explosion.

Nor was there a sound in the minute that followed, and when St. Pons looked again, Kingsland was still crouched on the sand, but the girl was gone. The Englishman waited, keeping out of sight until Kingsland got to his feet, unwilling to come upon the man while fear was so plain on him. But then he stood up on the slope, as Kingsland had done, and remarking loudly, "Why, Mr. Kingsland, I didn't expect to find you here," he climbed down to join him.

"Hello, St. Pons. Did you . . . did you see that flash of light?"

"I most certainly did, sir. That's what brought me back."

"Then you were here before?"

"Yes, with Muna. Then Miss Chilon came and I left."

". . . What do you think that light was?"

"I'm very curious about it." St. Pons was pushing the logs apart with a stick. "In fact, before that, I thought I saw another odd manifestation here, a sort of violet glow?"

"I saw it too. It ended just as I got here." Kingsland's hands were trembling. "What are you looking for?"

"I'm not sure. Do you recall smelling anything unusual?"

". . . Smelling anything?"

"I was thinking of sulfur. It burns with a beautiful violet glow—and with an odor, a characteristic, unmistakable odor."

"No . . . Would sulfur make that bright flash?"

"Scarcely. But other things might." He was killing the fire, gently probing the embers. "Mr. Kingsland, you say the violet light ended just as you got here. Is it possible Muna did something to the fire at that moment—a single quick move might be all—that could account for either, or maybe both, the ending of the violet light and the subsequent flare-up? . . . I have

in mind," he added, "the possibility that Muna carries things, whatever they are, in his gloves."

"... Yes, he was wearing gloves, wasn't he?" said Kingsland dully. "I forgot that ... St. Pons, what are you thinking about? You know something, don't you? What went on here between you and Muna?"

"We talked." He was scooping up ashes from the fire in two envelopes. "A conversation unique in my experience." He stamped out the last remaining sparks. "Let me tell you about it, sir," St. Pons began, as they started back to *Land's End*.

Long before they reached the house, the Englishman's account was done; it was a credit to his memory for exact quotation; not once did Kingsland interrupt, nor did he comment at its conclusion. They walked most of the way in silence. But when they were close enough for the din from the party to break in on them, Kingsland stopped.

"St. Pons, I suppose you know what you're doing. I don't know what to make of all this goddam hellish nonsense ... I'm very tired now."

He turned and walked on alone. St. Pons let him.

The party was at its height.

There were people everywhere. The music blasted, the dance floor rocked. Everybody shouted. They shouted hello, they shouted good-bye, and they shouted everything they had to say in between. The driveway was clogged, the barbecue pit was overrun, and the bar was barricaded behind empty cases and cartons against a mob whose temper smacked of insurrection.

Eventually St. Pons got a drink, but he did not have time to enjoy it. He was about to sit down on the terrace when Kingsland came out, descended the stairs, and began crossing the floodlighted parking space to the outbuildings clustered on the other side. St. Pons followed, but, forced to a more circuitous route, he had lost Kingsland by the time he was among the group of smaller buildings. There were no lights in any, and those close at hand were shuttered, but moving carefully, St. Pons progressed to a point where he suddenly heard a pounding and a rattling—the sounds of someone at a door, then Kingsland's voice.

"Muna, open this door ... I know you're in there ..."

He began rattling the door again, but only briefly before he stopped and switched on a

flashlight. St. Pons, around the corner of a neighboring cottage, saw the beam of light travel up and down the door, saw it come to rest on a heavy padlock placed rather high up. It was locked, hasp over staple; obviously no one could be inside, unless there were other means of entry. Apparently there were none, because with his discovery, Kingsland went back to the party.

St. Pons was not far behind. At the house, Kingsland disappeared upstairs, but soon he was down, wandering from one room to the next, scanning every face, widening his search to the grounds. Finally, when he marched off down the beach, St. Pons got himself a gin and settled comfortably on the terrace. It was as good a place as any for observing a wild goose chase...

Many drinks later, long after midnight, the house began to grow quiet. The orchestra had quit, a subdued radio played. The headlights against the sky were all from cars that were leaving. Scattered along the shore were numerous little fires; snatches of soft, sexy laughter and guitar music floated on a capricious wind. St. Pons, at length aware of his unshakable conviction that every

one of the fires was surrounded by a lambent violet aura, decided he was in need of a sobering drink. The ravaged bar was unattended. Two couples, dancing to radio music, paused when an announcer interrupted with a report of a hurricane named Carol on its way to Hatteras, and a tentative warning to small craft. "It's in the wind," he remembered Muna saying, "The air is changing." Outside the wind blew in weak, fitful gusts.

Later still, Kingsland returned. He climbed the terrace stairs exhausted, and staggered past St. Pons without seeing him.

St. Pons took out his notebook. Methodically, he entered the time, 3:40 A.M., and beside it, the fact that Kingsland had come back soaking wet, wearing only trousers and socks. Then he too went upstairs to sleep.

It was dawn when Muna made his way up the slope from the cove. His shoulders were hunched against the cold, but he walked slowly, very faintly whistling, watching morning light touch leaves and stones. Past the slumbering lodge, he turned toward the cottage where he had lived and worked for al-

most seven months, and when he drew near—because this was the last time he would ever again see it at daybreak—he stopped to survey it, to record in his memory its three chimneys like red fingers reaching skyward, its barred windows where sunlight entered cut into rectangles, its green-black ivy glistening with moisture, dancing in the wind . . .

Muna opened the padlock and went in. As he closed the door, a new fire sprang to life in the fireplace, and where a moment earlier the room had been dark and cold, all was bright and cheerful. He mounted a stairway to the bedroom directly above. Here too there was a fireplace, with logs and tinder awaiting a spark. Muna had but to think of it, and the fire was lit.

He began to pack his belongings.

It was nine o'clock when Muna, his activity shifted downstairs to the living room, responded to a crackling from the fireplace by opening the front door and leaving it ajar. Presently someone used the knocker, and Muna called, "Come in, Mr. St. Pons."

The door swung open and St. Pons appeared. He glanced

from Muna—across the room, on his knees, packing sketchbooks in a suitcase—to the corner walls near the door, and Muna, aware that the Englishman was hunting mirrors or other reflecting surfaces, did not hide his enjoyment of the other's confusion.

"Sit down, won't you? I'll just finish this and we'll have a steaming kettle. I've been expecting you."

"Have you indeed, Mr. Muna? You're very kind, not to say clairvoyant . . ." He found himself staring at a low table before the fire, on which stood a tin of tea, another of maté, two small teapots, and ready cups and saucers, and he added, with a slight frown, "As a matter of fact, I seldom impose early morning visits. However, from the bustle at the dock, there may have been a change in plan, and I did want to speak to you again. I notice . . ." and now he was gazing fixedly at the strange way the flames were behaving, each small tongue of fire curving in toward the center of the fireplace, joining under the kettle to make a solid, pressured jet, ". . . I notice," said St. Pons, looking away, "you too seem to be rather busy . . ."

"Yes, I'm leaving here. As

you know, last night changed many plans." Muna got up and pushed the suitcase aside.

"... As I know, Mr. Muna? How do you meah?"

"Come," said Muna smiling, "I know who you are and why you came here. Let us talk openly. You are an unusual man, Mr. St. Pons, and I have a fondness for conversation." He took the kettle. "Tea?—or do you perhaps care for maté?" He was wearing cotton work gloves.

"Tea, thank you." He prepared the teapot and Muna poured. "And thank you for being honest. It does make things easier . . . May I ask, as long as we're talking openly, how you know who I am?"

"The fire last night," said Muna. "Whatever was spoken before a fire, I know."

St. Pons said, "You're discouraging me at the outset, Mr. Muna."

"But isn't this what you want to know?" Muna sat down opposite St. Pons. "Please don't think I am making sport. I appreciate that it is difficult to comprehend these statements. It is like learning a new language . . . like learning the language of fire, which comes very slowly, even after one has grasped the idea." He stirred the steeping maté tenderly. "How

strange all communication is, especially to a foreigner in a strange land; he can scarcely accept that people around him understand each other by means of bewildering, apparently unrelated sounds. But in time, if he is interested, he learns to relate these sounds and extract their meaning. It is the same with fire. Not only the sounds, but the smoke, the sparks, the shape of the flames—all these relate to each other and make a language. And there is more. Take the smoke, for example, where one must consider the color, the density, the speed of manufacture, the convolutions, the odor, the rate of dissipation, and so on. It is very complicated, and as I told you last night, I am not more than a beginner, but fire and I can communicate quite well."

He poured maté into his cup and drank, holding the cup awkwardly in the palm of a gloved hand. St. Pons turned to the fire to confirm—as he had glimpsed from the corner of an eye—that the flames were now curving out, away from the center, keeping the kettle below boiling. He sipped his tea thoughtfully.

"Mr. Muna, when you speak of fire, is it a plural

entity? Is fire one or many?"

"Fire is a word like mankind. Mankind is one, but many. As with mankind, there are individual differences, but life is the same for all." He took a brown cigarette from a package on the table, then rolled a sheet of paper to a taper, stuck it in the fire and lit his cigarette on its tiny flame. "You see?" he said, indicating the taper. "This is how fire reproduces."

"Yes, Mr. Muna," St. Pons said dryly. "I see."

"You asked me last night," said Muna. "You mentioned growth and movement, nutrition, and response, and of all these, reproduction is the most difficult to understand. I am only demonstrating."

"Mr. Muna," said St. Pons, "assuming that you're serious, what do you prove when you light one fire from another? How are you demonstrating that fire is capable of reproduction," he shook his head, "when you are responsible for it?"

Muna asked, "Do you say a flower cannot reproduce because it depends on a bee to carry pollen? Am I less a part of nature than a bee? Fire depends on mankind. This is central to comprehending the life force of fire; the force that seeks existence. It comes

to life in many ways. Sparks are an evidence of this effort; true, there are many sparks, and few ever do reproduce, but a fish lays millions of eggs, and sometimes none of these eggs becomes a fish. Lightning is another way. Is lightning unnatural? Do we not recognize that certain chemical reactions may cause fire, or mechanical principles based on the laws of friction? Are not all these natural?"

"But they are too accidental, too haphazard. Many ages ago fire found a much surer way. Consider how impossible are our industries, our commerce, our arts, without fire. Man's domination of other species on earth dates from the time that he began to serve fire—for it is, at least to me, a great question which is more dependent on the other—and I sometimes think that the primary function of mankind may be to insure the existence of fire. A cow in a pasture has a view of the world in which she finds mankind very useful; men feed her, shelter her, care for her in every way, and all they want is her happiness and her milk. Fire has made itself indispensable to man; it has civilized him and given him great blessings, and all it asks in return is to

be used, to exist. As we sit here, it warms and lights this room, it has brewed your accustomed morning drink and mine, it holds us in its charmed circle . . .”

“Good Lord,” said St. Pons under his breath. He started to say something, stopped, shook his head and laughed. “Mr. Muna,” he said, “I don’t know whether you or the fire is the more hypnotic.”

“We are collaborators,” Muna smiled. “Even when fire is without use, it prevails on us to make it, just to watch the flames, to sit and think and be fascinated.”

“Yes,” said St. Pons slowly, “and there’s such a thing as abnormal fascination, where possibly destructive impulses come into play—among pyromaniacs, for instance. Or don’t you agree?”

“Of course. Whatever man uses is subject to his destructive impulses as well as his creative ones, not only individually but collectively . . . Witch-burning, book-burning, the ordeal by fire, are ancient in history . . . the new H-bomb is perhaps a more modern example. But just as with human beings, the life force of fire is sometimes bound up with destruction. When a fire experiments with movement,

starting, say, in a forest, the results may be excellent from the fire’s point of view, in that it learns something about moving from one place to another. For us, however, this experiment may be a disaster.”

“I see. You think of a forest fire as an experiment in movement?”

“Not of a necessity, but possibly. Fire uses the winds, the air currents, much more skilfully than an albatross.”

“Why does fire undertake these experiments?”

“For the same reason humans want to go to the moon. Intelligence is curious.”

“And how, Mr. Muna, do you account for your intimate knowledge of all these . . . facts?”

“They came to me through my painting; my work, and a deep personal unhappiness.” Muna sighed and threw his cigarette butt into the fire. Flames enveloped it with a rainbow of color; there was a tiny flash and the butt flew apart with a hundred sparks. It made Muna smile again. “There are great tensions in painting, what you might call a sort of emotional friction. This relates to the painter’s difficulty in dealing with a three-dimensional world in a two-dimensional medium . . .

In the world of fire we deal with a world of two dimensions, where neither motion nor, consequently, friction, exists. Fire there corresponds to life in the embryo, as something latent. Where and when does life begin for fire? It begins when latent fire crosses the division into our world of three dimensions, where motion and friction are synonymous. This is the problem of fire if it wants to live—it must go from the latent to the real. The same is true for painting. If it wants to live, it must somehow ignite in the spirit of the beholder; its spark must travel from the two-dimensional canvas to the three-dimensional human”

When Muna stopped speaking, St. Pons rose. “I can’t say that I really understand you, Mr. Muna,” he said, choosing his words carefully, “but I have learned a great deal.”

“Good,” said Muna.

“Do you mind if I have a look around the place?”

“Please feel free. My sleeping quarters are upstairs, my studio is through this door. I will go on packing.”

Ten minutes later, St. Pons left. He stopped, after his tour of inspection, only long enough to ask again whether

he might see some of Muna’s paintings; the refusal this time was tempered by the explanation that they had all been crated; he thanked Muna and went out.

When he had gone, Muna took off his gloves and began addressing some of the wooden crates. He did this by moving a finger an inch or so above the boards; as he traced the letters in air, they appeared in the wood, burned in with fire, smoking the least bit.

St. Pons found Kingsland on the dock, directing the fueling of his yacht. He was in a bad state, dirty and disheveled, barking at the crew impatiently, angrily. St. Pons made a wary approach, but as soon as Kingsland saw him he broke off work and came down the dock to meet him halfway. “I’ve only got a minute,” he said, wiping sweat from his face. “I’m leaving here and I’m not putting in at New York. There’ll be a car at your disposal, or you can fly back if you prefer.”

“Fly? In this weather?”

“It won’t last. But suit yourself.”

“Mr. Kingsland, I’ve just come from seeing Muna and—”

"Save your breath," said Kingsland sharply. "I'm through with Muna. I don't want to hear anything about him."

"Nevertheless, sir, if Muna has had access to the *Ane-nome*, I most urgently advise you to go over her thoroughly, stem to stern."

"Why? What do you know?"

"It isn't what I know, it's what I fear," said St. Pons, and he paused deliberately, taking the time to light a cigarette, to handle matters at his own pace. "Mr. Kingsland, Muna is in a dangerous mood. He's clever, he hates you, he may be unbalanced. So far he's confined himself to superior variety hall magic—I think I've detected uses phorus—but I hate to think what might happen if he goes further. He's a fraud and a fake, but if he should plant yellow phosphorus aboard, for example, which ignites spontaneously at ninety-three point five degrees Fahrenheit—"

"You're wrong, St. Pons," Kingsland said flatly.

"Possibly, but the pattern is ominous."

"You don't know anything at all about Muna, do you?"

St. Pons said grimly, "I know he destroyed a painting

in your gallery, and he may have destroyed others here. I know he's determined to make sure that you do not in any way profit from your relationship with him."

"What are you trying to say, St. Pons?"

"If you'll forgive me, sir," the Englishman said slowly, "I feel that Muna will try to prevent your departure with Miss Chilon aboard."

Kingsland's neck muscles strained; he struggled with his rage, but his voice was low and controlled when he spoke. "Miss Chilon is my wife," he said. "Muna found that out last night, on the *Ane-nome*. Shall I tell you what he did when he found out? He pointed a finger at me—from fifteen feet away—and my clothes caught fire. I had to jump overboard to save my life. Now you take that and explain it with tungstate and magnesium, but I'm getting out of here. I'm sailing the *Ane-nome* first stop Cuba, and I'm taking my wife with me, and neither hell nor high water is going to stop me."

With that he turned and walked away, and St. Pons went back to the house.

But the morning wore on and still the *Ane-nome IV* remained at the dock.

There was nothing for St. Pons to do but wait. *Land's End* was being shut down. A squad of handymen repaired the damage of the night before, tidying the lodge and grounds, sealing the cottages anew, but the smoke from the three chimneys of Muna's studio continued unabated. By early afternoon, the shutting down of the house had reached a stage where lunch consisted of canned food and leftover cold cuts. Only half a dozen or so of Kingsland's guests were still left, hanging on until their cars arrived, and St. Pons found their talk interesting.

"Do you really think they're married?"

"Why not? Avery seems unhappy enough."

"Who wouldn't be?—married a month and no honeymoon till now."

"A fine honeymoon, with the MacPhersons going along."

"Cuba's a long way off, dear. They might want to play bridge."

"That's if the bride stays aboard after she sobers up."

"She'll stay, all right. She's locked up in her cabin."

"But isn't that against the law?"

"My dear, she's his wife.

Her only recourse is a divorce."

"Of course. What do you suppose all this ghastly hurry means—and in the face of a hurricane? He's afraid she'll come ashore and run off with that Mexican painter of hers. You notice he's still here too?"

"All I say is, it's things like this happening in Massachusetts that gave the south its reputation for hospitality. Cold cuts! . . ."

By late afternoon the yacht had not sailed. Her troubles seemed endless. At one point there was a great commotion on the dock, and St. Pons learned that a fuel line had parted and a large quantity of oil had been lost. Then the MacPhersons left the yacht and came to the house. Crewmen carried their luggage. From MacPherson, St. Pons learned that a pump had burned out a bushing, and with this new delay, mindful of the steadily worsening weather, Kingsland's last two guests had experienced a change of mind.

"I've never seen him like this," said Mr. MacPherson. "The officers say the hurricane is going to hit this region, and Avery seems bent on heading right into it."

"It's a suicidal urge," said Mrs. MacPherson. "Like the lemmings of Norway, drowning instead of mating."

"Frankly," said Mr. MacPherson, "I think Avery's made the same choice."

Within the hour, cars arrived and the last of the guests departed. St. Pons, alone now except for the workingmen, watched the cars go down the road, barely able to find their way through the swirling clouds of sand torn loose by the rising wind. It was impossible to tell now if Muna's chimneys were still smoking, but St. Pons had seen Muna during the afternoon, loading a small, disreputable-looking van with his belongings, and the van had not left. On the dock, activity continued unremittingly. The surface of the cove was broken with crested wavelets, and radiating banks of cirrus filled the sky . . .

Just before twilight, Muna emerged and joined St. Pons as he stood on the terrace, braving the near-gale to keep watch on the *Aenome*. Muna seemed subdued, but in good spirits. "Well, Mr. St. Pons, we are by ourselves now," he smiled. "What has kept you here?"

"You, Mr. Muna."

"Why is that?"

"I want to make sure you don't set the place on fire."

Muna laughed. "You don't understand. I would not misuse fire."

"That's very reassuring," St. Pons said dryly. "May I ask what is keeping you here?"

"I'm waiting to take Lola Chilon home with me."

"Do you know she's married to Kingsland?"

"Yes, but it doesn't matter." He smiled. "Annulments are very simple in Mexico, especially for Mexicans."

"Do you know she's locked in her cabin?"

"She will get out," said Muna simply. "We are meant for each other, and that is why we have such trouble. Just as I am of fire, she is of earth—and when you have fire and earth together, what do you have?—a volcano. In the same way, take Kingsland. His element is water, and that is why he is not afraid to defy the storm. And what do you have when you mix earth and water? Mud. Very bad, you see?"

"And how do you explain your relationship with Kingsland?"

"Mix fire and water, and you get—vapor—a relation-

ship that is without substance."

"How clever," St. Pons murmured. "Can you perhaps tell me what my element is?"

Muna nodded. "Air," he said, turning to go, but he paused long enough to add, "And when you mix air and fire, Mr. St. Pons, the result is hot air . . ."

Some minutes later, inside the house, St. Pons methodically noted this conversation too in the copious record in his little leather book.

As darkness fell, a lobster boat came running before the storm to seek shelter in the cove. Shortly afterward, the crew of the *Anenome* appeared at the lodge. They huddled against the terrace rail, watching lights moving on the dock, and the first officer told St. Pons that all but two men had quit the ship, in spite of Kingsland's offers of enormous bonuses. "The man's

daffy," he said. "Look down there, sir. You can see they're casting off."

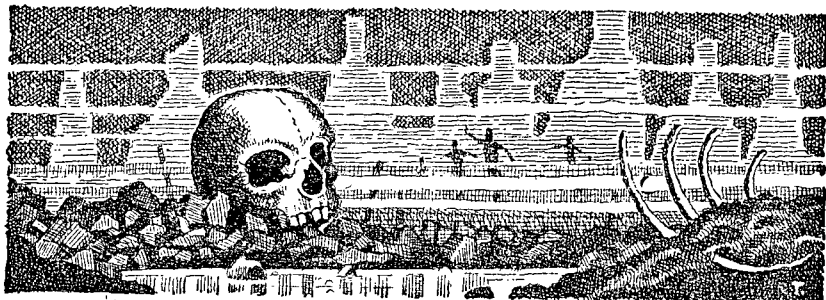
St. Pons was amazed. "I thought surely he'd realized he daren't attempt it . . . Can he run her with only two men?"

"It's a very dangerous proposition, even in good weather."

"Isn't there some way to stop him?"

"No, sir. If it were a merchantman, I could complain she's not seaworthy, and the law would force him to apply to a district court or a justice of the peace, for clearance, but it doesn't apply to yachts . . ."

The lights were gone from the dock. Sand swept by in blinding force, carrying past whole branches and young uprooted trees, and the sound of the gale grew to a terrifying shriek. The *Anenome's* running lights came on, twinkling through the gloom.



Then suddenly a wall of fire shot up from the water, a massive curtain of flame forty feet high, between the *Anenome* and the cove; it arched like a horseshoe, the yacht and the dock inside, both ends touching the shore.

Standing there, braced against the rail, St. Pons could see outlined against the fire four running figures, fleeing the ship, reaching the dock. Only then could he move, and he raced after the others, down the beach to help them.

Long after the excitement had died away, things were still hazy in St. Pons mind. Upstairs, Kingsland was in a doctor's care, and the house was very quiet. The radio said that soon the hurricane named Carol would be Cape Cod history. Then St. Pons would leave . . . but now he needed time to think . . . to remember, and to think . . .

He remembered the way Muna had looked, his face impassive, content, as he led Dolores Chilon Kingsland to the van . . . and the van disappearing into the night and the storm. He recalled what the *Anenome's* officers had said about the fantastic fire in the cove . . . how the oil

the ship had lost had remained on the surface of the water, there to be ignited and to blaze . . . how the wind had cleared the water around the ship and the dock, and kept the flames from either, until at last the fire had harmlessly burned itself out . . .

And all this, thought St. Pons, all this was no more than an incredible series of coincidences, not even a trick, nothing that related to human agency, not magic, not inexplicable, not frightening . . . nothing but facts, to be added to facts, to produce an answer . . .

He started to take out his little notebook for a final entry, but as he reached into his pocket, his arm stiffened. Slowly his hand came out, clutching in paralyzed fingers the remains of paper and red leather, now entirely reduced to ashes.

His jowls hung loose, his little eyes spun dizzily, unable to focus on the horrifying object in his hand. Then, mercifully, his breath came out, the air bursting hot from his lungs, blowing the ashes from his hand. He watched them settle slowly on the rich red carpet, all around his feet, and he stood there, trying to think . . . to think . . .

Little Tin Soldier

BY BILL PETERS

This is 1982, and you don't buy a new car, you buy a shining new robot guaranteed to do everything but psychoanalyze the cat. You need no gas, oil, or collision insurance with these models, but there is a question involved: Are robots here to stay?

June 17, 1982,
Samuel Bell,
Danville, Ohio

The Household Robot Co.,
12 River Street,
Chicago, Illinois.

Gentlemen:

You will find me listed on your books as purchaser of one of your S-25 Household Robots. You know nothing of me, personally, of course, but the very fact that we bought one of the first robots you put on the market, should indicate to you that Helen—my wife—and I are very modern, forward-looking people who like to keep abreast of the times. So it was with much interest that we received delivery of

the six-foot crate in which you shipped our robot.

We unpacked it immediately and it was then that we found the printed sticker on its posterior—your note asking the purchaser to write in and let you know how he liked the robot and how well things went in general.

Hence this letter, as I like to be cooperative. Also, the robot is on its way back to Chicago, and I hope you will also be cooperative and return my money.

First off, getting Hey-You on his feet and functioning, wasn't the easiest job in the world. I am referring, of course, to the robot. My ten-year-old son, Johnny, named him, after hearing me read

the serial number stamped into the steel behind his right ear—AU-4.

We finally got the robot on its feet and propped against the wall. Then we opened the other box labeled *Vitalizing Unit*. There were ten pieces of mechanism in all, which made up this unit. They were supposed to go into the robot's head and were shipped separately—as you explained in the directions—because they might be damaged in transit if completely assembled at the factory.

They looked pretty complicated, spread out there on the floor, and I thought I was stumped. But you pooh-poohed my apprehension in your direction manual by stating that a ten-year-old child could assemble and install them.

Therefore, it might interest you to know that that was exactly what happened. I went down into the basement for some tools and had a little difficulty in locating them. When I went back upstairs, there was Hey-You, completely assembled and my son, Johnny, standing there looking pretty proud of himself. He said, "Look what I did, Dad! It said in the book I could do it and I did!"

I was proud of him and pat-

ted him on the head. Now there was nothing to do but push the button under the robot's left arm and he'd begin functioning.

Helen was looking dubiously at the robot. As I advanced toward it and reached out to push the button, she said, "It's pretty big, Sam. I hope it doesn't—"

I pushed the button.

"—tear out a door frame."

Whereupon, the robot's eyes lighted up, gears clicked faintly inside it, and it walked over to the open door leading into the kitchen. As we stared in horror, it took the door frame in its two steel hands, applied a little pressure, and tore the whole frame out by the roots.

Helen screamed. The robot turned, dropped the door frame on the floor with a resounding crash, and stood there awaiting further orders.

So I have news for you gentlemen. In future guide books, you'd better delete the assertion that a ten-year-old can put the mechanical brain into your Household Robot. Either that or append the statement to read any ten-year-old child-genius. Our Johnny is an average, bright American kid, and he missed by quite a distance.



I shut Hey-You off and dismantled the vitalizing unit and found Johnny had crossed some wires in a manner that short circuited the selective device in the *command differential*. Thus, the robot obeyed any and all commands given—out of context—or in any other manner.

So, as nearly as we could figure it, I'd snapped the switch just in time for the robot to hear the last few words of Helen's remark: "—tear out a door frame." The robot obeyed with an efficiency that was appalling.

I don't suppose I have the right to hold you responsible for the damage to my house, though. No doubt, if pressed, you would come up with a ten-year-old who could install the unit correctly. Therefore, I had the door-frame replaced at my own expense, and we'll forget that part of it.

But there is more—much more—as you'll soon discover.

We were somewhat shaken, as you can no doubt readily imagine, by our first experience with Hey-You, so we didn't feel up to any more experimentation that evening. I spent an hour or so checking and rechecking the vitalizing unit to see that I had it in correctly and then we called it a day. When I saw how amaz-

ingly ingenious the unit was, I lost my apprehension and was again glad I'd bought the robot.

But Helen was still extremely dubious. When we were in bed for the night, she said, "Sam, did I ever tell you about my great-grandfather, Hubert?"

"I don't think you did," I replied.

"Well, a long time ago—1910, I think it was, he bought an automobile."

"That was nice."

"No it wasn't."

"Why not?"

"Well, it was one of the first automobiles ever built and they weren't anything like the cars of today."

"Naturally."

"Great-grandfather Hubert liked to be modern and all that—"

"Just the way we want to be—first with the latest."

"That's right, so he bought this automobile and drove it home. When he steered it into the new garage he'd built, something went wrong. The automobile kept right on going—right through the rear wall of the garage and into the pig-pen where it killed six of his prize swine."

"I'll bet he was pretty mad."

"Mad is scarcely the word.

He sued the automobile company and lost and that made him even madder."

"But there was nothing more he could do about it."

"Oh, yes, there was. Great-grandfather Hubert was president of the County Board and had a lot of power. He pushed through a local law forbidding anyone to drive an automobile on any county road. He said they were addled experiments and obviously not here to stay."

"But he was wrong."

"He never admitted it."

"But the law had to be repealed."

"Yes, but he made it very hard for the automobile manufacturers. He finally allowed cars on the road, but he slipped through another law that somebody had to walk ahead of every car warning people out of the way."

"And right up to the end—with millions of cars on the road—he swore they were but a passing fancy."

"Wasn't that the grandfather who insisted on being hauled to the cemetery by a team of horses?"

"Yes. They had an awful time finding two horses."

"Very interesting, darling, but why do you bring it up now?"

"Because I remembered

Great-grandfather Hubert when that monster tore out the door frame tonight. The situation was so similar to his disaster with the automobile."

"And you think perhaps robots aren't here to stay?"

"Well, maybe they are and maybe they aren't, but Great-grandfather Hubert never stepped into an automobile and he lived to be ninety-one."

"So—?"

"I think we should get rid of the robot. Somehow I can't visualize any of us living very long with the thing in the house."

I comforted her and explained very carefully what had happened in both cases. The brakes on Great-grandfather Hubert's car had gone bad and we hadn't assembled the brain of our robot correctly. Both items came under the heading of correctable mechanical failures and should be viewed as such.

She finally agreed and we went to sleep.

The next day I left home early to visit a client in Ohio, so I was out of town all day and didn't get back until quite late. When I arrived home, Helen and Johnny came running out to the garage to meet me. Johnny appeared

quite excited, and Helen was obviously distraught. "Anything wrong?" I inquired.

"Hey-You's gone nuts!" Johnny informed me.

"What do you mean?"

"He's washing the dishes!" Helen cried. "For heaven's sake—do something!"

"Washing the dishes? What's so terrible about that?"

"He's been washing them all day—over and over again! He won't stop!"

"I could push the button, but Mom won't let me."

"I should say I won't. It's too dangerous!"

We'd been walking toward the house and now I stood in the back doorway and saw the robot doing what seemed to be an expert job. It stood at the sink washing plates and placing them carefully on the drain board. He finished with what were in the sink and then got a towel and began drying them.

"Stop him," Helen said, "or he'll have all the gold washed off."

"It's neuter, my dear. Not masculine."

"I don't care—make it stop."

"It won't respond to command?"

"I've begged and pleaded.

I've argued. I've tried to appeal to its reason—"

"It has no reason, dear."

"I know that! All it has is a mania for washing dishes. Stop it!"

"I walked over and pushed the button and the robot immediately became immobile.

Helen sank into a chair. "I thought maybe everything would be all right this morning," she said, "So—after you were gone—I said to it: 'Wash the dishes.'"

"You spoke slowly—as it said in the guide book?"

"Yes, and the robot went to work immediately. It washed all the dirty dishes and put them away. Then it got them out and washed them over again. Then, it got out my good dishes—every dish in the house, in fact—and it's been washing them ever since. It wouldn't stop."

"You had only to push the button."

Helen shuddered. "I went close to it once and it snarled at me."

"Nonsense. The mechanism is new. The joints have to be broken in."

"But why wouldn't it quit?"

"I'll check it over after supper and see."

Helen got supper herself

after which, I took the vitalizing unit apart and found what was wrong. The revolving gear—the one that moves the mechanism which cleans the memory tape—had stuck. Of course the robot could receive no new orders and the last command—the one to wash dishes—remained in the functional position.

I had quite a time with Helen that evening. She made me march Hey-You off into a corner and leave it there. I explained what had happened—how ordinary mechanical error had been responsible for the mishaps, and how truly wonderful the robot was—how man's ingenuity had fashioned a mechanism that could actually think for itself and lift away many burdens with which mankind had been saddled for years.

Helen remained skeptical. She said she was personally fond of some of the burdens of mankind and felt we really shouldn't have things too easy. She suggested that if God had wanted us to have robots, He would have provided them free of charge.

I showed her the fallacy of this line of argument—that the same had been spoken of the steam engine, the airplane, the automobile, and just about every invention

down through the ages. No doubt, I reminded her, some cave man once said: "If God had wanted man to have the wheel, he'd have given him round feet."

Helen was unconvinced, and upon that note, we went to sleep.

The next day I remained home and gave all my time to the robot, feeling that Helen had to be made to appreciate it or we'd get nowhere. I took the vitalizing unit apart, went over it carefully and put it together again. Then I re-read the instruction book and gave a demonstration of what a wonderful work-saver a robot is.

The demonstration left nothing to be desired. Hey-You, responding to my orders, washed the car, helped the carpenter repair the broken doorway, got lunch, mowed the lawn, and changed a tire.

Helen was impressed, so I struck while the iron was hot, and put Hey-You through some really intricate paces. The robot, under our astonished eyes, took Johnny's amateur radio station apart and put it together again. I went even further. My son, Johnny, is also interested in chemistry and has a laboratory of sorts in our basement. We took Hey-You down there

and it swiftly put together some very complicated chemical formulae.

Then we went back upstairs and the robot baked biscuits, creamed some chicken, and made us a delightful lunch. That seemed to convince Helen that she'd been wrong. The tension she'd been under relaxed noticeably, and I felt my point had been won. And after Johnny began giving the robot orders which it obeyed promptly and perfectly, I was sure we'd have Hey-You around for the rest of our lives.

Johnny took to the robot immediately. He called Hey-You his little tin soldier, and treated us to a demonstration of precision marching on the front lawn that brought the neighbors out of their houses to watch.

So everything was fine—or so I thought. A week passed, with Helen and Johnny sharing the use of the robot. After Hey-You had done the household chores for Helen, Johnny took over and initiated the robot into the mysteries of his childish games. I was fortunate if I could get a little of the robot's time for washing the car, painting the back fence, and things like that.

It was on a Wednesday—

the third week after Hey-You's arrival, that he disappeared. When I got home that night, Helen was questioning Johnny.

"But you were both in the backyard. You must have seen him go away."

Johnny said, "I didn't see him go. I went down the street to give Eddy Kane back his football. When I got back, it was dark and I thought Hey-You was in the house. I didn't see him go anywhere."

Helen turned to me. "The robot's gone, Sam. How could a robot as big as Hey-You just disappear? And why would he go away?"

"Maybe something went wrong in his head," Johnny suggested.

"Now there's nothing to worry about," I said. "If he's wandered away, there's no great harm done. Somebody will see him and call us."

We sat around all evening, waiting for the call, but it didn't come. By ten o'clock I was worried. It certainly looked as though our robot had been stolen. That was something that had never occurred to be, but it was logical. It wouldn't be too difficult for a thief to talk the robot into leaving us. Very simple in fact. But Danville,

Ohio, is a rather small town and I couldn't conceive of any local person doing such a thing.

However, I called Tom Welker, our Chief of Police and he came over to the house. He said, "So you think somebody stole your robot, Eh, Sam?"

"Frankly, I don't know, but I can't think of any other answer."

"Well, let's get the details. Who saw him—it, last?" Tom took out a notebook and waited.

"Johnny, I guess." I gave him the details.

"Maybe I'd better talk to Johnny."

I called the lad up from the basement where he'd been working in his chemistry lab. "Did you find Hey-You?" he asked of Tom.

"No, son, but I will. Tell me—did you see any suspicious characters in the street—around the house?"

"Uh-huh—I didn't see anybody. Hey-You and I were working on a project."

"Is that so? What project?"

"One out of a comic book I've got."

"Just what was this project, Johnny?"

"It was to blow up the earth."

Helen gasped. "Johnny!

What kind of games are you—?"

"It was fun, Mom. Especially with Hey-You. He was the villain and I was the good guy. In the comic book there was Latso—he was the villain and he had a cave somewhere and he came up with a machine that would set off a chemical formula that would blow up the earth, and I was Bill Dare, the good guy and I had to stop him at the last minute."

I felt the hair tighten on my head. "And did you stop him, son?"

"Well, we never got that far. Latso had made the chemical formula and the machine, and—"

Tom Welker was fiddling with his notebook. He said, "I guess none of that's very important—"

"You'd be surprised how important it is!" I snapped. Then I turned to Johnny. "Now son, think hard! The cave Latso was supposed to hide in—where is it?"

"We didn't have one, Dad. I was going to use the basement."

I'd had enough experience with Hey-You to know what to do—if we had time. I said, "Tom—we've got to work fast or this town's liable to go up

in a burst of glory. Do you know of any holes around close?"

He gaped. "Holes? What are you talking about?"

"Caves, man—caves! You know, where that robot could hide. Think!"

"I don't know of any caves in town—there aren't any."

"Then he must have made one of his own. We've got to call the army post over at Dayton—fast!"

"What on earth do we want of the army?"

I didn't take time to answer. I got on the phone and put the call through and inside an hour, a squad of soldiers arrived. They carried the equipment necessary to locate underground bombs and such, and they went to work.

It took three hours to find Hey-You, because the device kept signaling for old sewer pipes, buried scrap metal and what not. But they finally located the robot in a grown-over, long-unused well two blocks away. Hey-You had camouflaged the entrance

very carefully, just like it said in the comic book. It had its machine ready to detonate the chemical bomb it had made, and the soldiers said that while the bomb would hardly have destroyed the earth, it would have made a grand mess of the town.

The village fathers were pretty scared and pretty indignant and they immediately passed a law barring robots from the city limits and I think maybe the law will stand for a long time.

Frankly, I doubt, now, that robots are here to stay and will do everything in my power to stem their march of progress.

So, as I asked in the beginning of this letter, please be cooperative and return my money. You'll still come out way ahead, because, on the strength of the information furnished herein, you'll be able to recall all the other robots you've sold before disaster strikes and you are sued for everything you have.

Sincerely,
Samuel Bell.

FUGITIVE FROM SPACE

BY MURRAY LEINSTER

Burt was an ordinary guy going his ordinary way, when somebody dropped a tent on him. Then this weird runaway from outer space, took over his body, his girl, and his mind. Burt got mad. Well wouldn't you?

WHEN the first streaks of night appeared among the stars, Burt was telling Norma goodnight. He had left the motor of his car running as earnest of his intention to leave immediately, but he didn't want to go. This was up at Lake Katona, where he'd borrowed a lakeside cottage to get some writing done. Norma happened to be vacationing at a boarding-house at the same resort, and they'd met and it seemed very remarkable. They even discovered that they lived within blocks of each other when not on vacation, though they'd never met. Burt discovered to his astonishment that he even knew the building in which Norma had a small apartment. So it was very plainly an act of destiny, no less, which caused them to en-

counter each other here.

The sky was like velvet. Night-insects whirred insistently. The scents of summer filled the air. There was no moon.

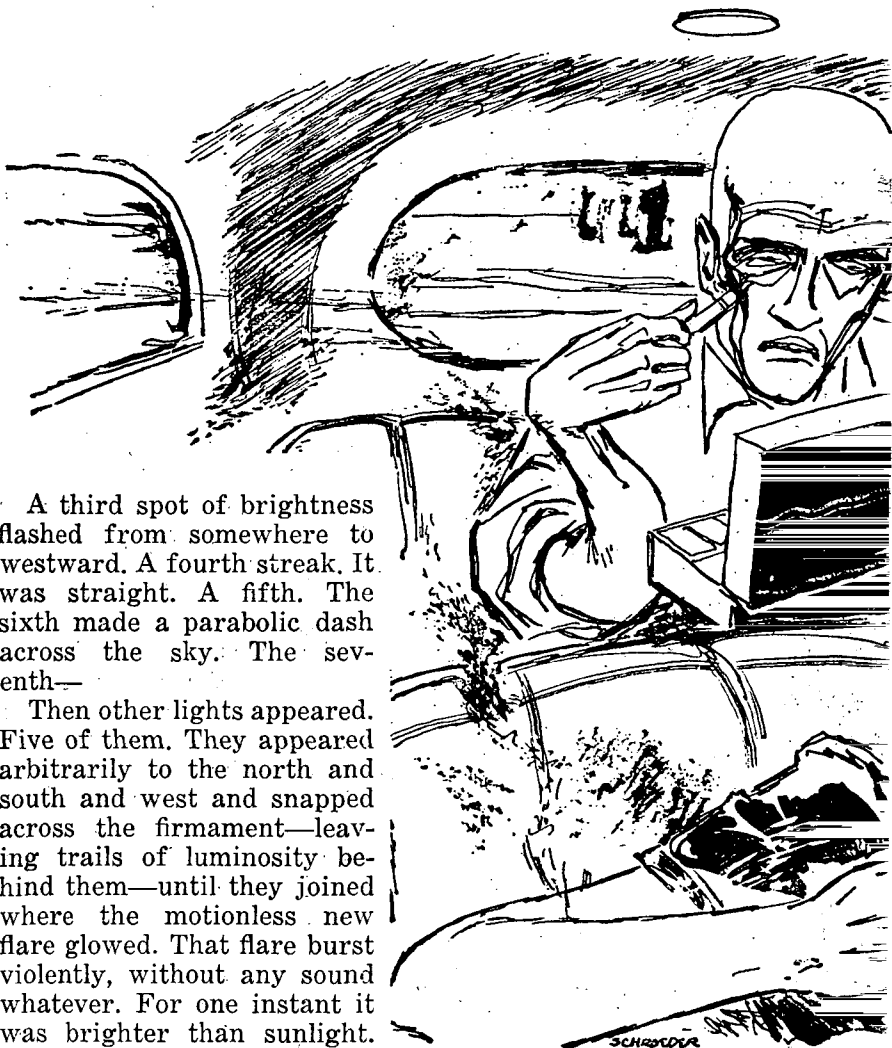
"Maybe tomorrow," said Burt, reluctantly ready to depart, "tomorrow we can—"

Then the first streak of light flashed across the sky.

It wasn't a shooting-star. It wasn't even a streak of light, but a tiny spot of lurid brightness, which shone so harshly and moved so swiftly that it seemed to be a line.

There was another flash. They saw it clearly. The glow it left behind was sharp-edged. It looked like a line-wide strip of the Milky Way stretched across the sky.

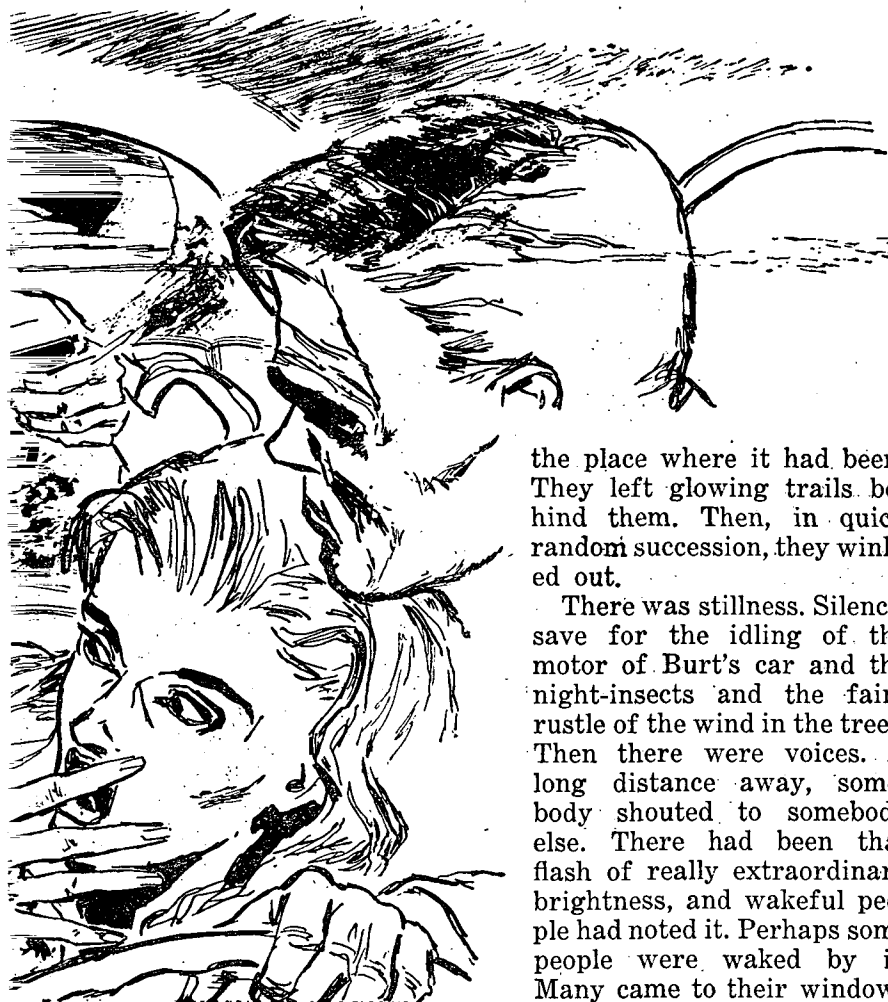
"I don't know what it is," admitted Burt. "I've never seen anything like it before."



A third spot of brightness flashed from somewhere to westward. A fourth streak. It was straight. A fifth. The sixth made a parabolic dash across the sky. The seventh—

Then other lights appeared. Five of them. They appeared arbitrarily to the north and south and west and snapped across the firmament—leaving trails of luminosity behind them—until they joined where the motionless new flare glowed. That flare burst violently, without any sound whatever. For one instant it was brighter than sunlight. Then it turned yellow, faded swiftly to orange, and went out in an infinitesimal speck of red which ceased to be.

Six lights like small lurid stars moved restlessly about



the place where it had been. They left glowing trails behind them. Then, in quick random succession, they winked out.

There was stillness. Silence, save for the idling of the motor of Burt's car and the night-insects and the faint rustle of the wind in the trees. Then there were voices. A long distance away, somebody shouted to somebody else. There had been that flash of really extraordinary brightness, and wakeful people had noted it. Perhaps some people were waked by it. Many came to their windows to see its cause. They looked skyward, and saw the meaningless hieroglyphic in the heavens.

Burt and Norma still stared upward. Norma whispered:

"Do you—suppose that was—near?"

Burt shrugged. "I think it was in our atmosphere, yes. That first line is getting blurry. And I think all the lines are moving a little. There's a bright star there, shining right through one of those lines. A moment ago it was outside it."

He was right. The pattern in the sky was shifting, though very slowly. Also it was blurring. Where Burt stood, there were voices all about. Somebody called authoritatively:

"Vapor-trails! They're the vapor-trails of jet-planes up there! Night maneuvers!"

Burt shook his head a little. Norma whispered again.

"Is it that, Burt? Vapor-trails from planes?"

"They wouldn't show at night," said Burt, "unless in bright moonlight, and there isn't any moon. No: Planes didn't make those lines! And what exploded?"

"What?" asked Norma.

"I don't know. I'm asking." Burt continued to frown upward.

People came out of the boarding-houses, pulling on wraps and bathrobes to stare up at the heavens. None had seen the lights themselves.

Most had looked out because of the flashing, noiseless explosion in mid-sky which had lighted all the world for part of a second. They'd seen the streaks of luminosity. Now they came out to gape at them.

But nothing happened. Burt's car-engine purred quietly. People called to each other. There was that curious gaiety which overtakes commonplace human beings when something happens which is startling enough to justify unconventional behavior or attire.

Norma drew away from Burt.

"The lines are fading," said Burt awkwardly. "I guess I'll be going. See you tomorrow?"

She nodded. She pressed his hand and moved toward the door. Burt got in his car and drove away. There were many people out-of-doors now, with blankets or shawls about their nightclothing. They continued to call to each other. Apparently all had been roused by the flash of light from something which had appeared to explode. Apparently nobody else had seen the spots of light which had made the now blurring lines among the stars.

The lakeside village ended. Burt drove along the narrow

concrete highway that circled the lake and served the cottages and small estates upon its shores. The windows of his car were open, and all the fragrance of the night blew through. The highway curved and curved. There were trees. There were the ditches beside the road. Now and again a mailbox. Once or twice more elaborate gateways. The elaboration of entrances was not always proportionate to the buildings inside them. The smell of pine-tags. Once or twice, dim lights in houses well back from the road.

Ahead, there was a clearing where somebody had cut down trees to make room for a summer cottage and a lawn. A toolshed showed in the headlight beams. Burt knew that there was a pile of building material a little way back in the open space. His car came out of the trees. He leaned forward to look up through the windshield at the dimming pattern in the sky.

The stars were blotted out. Something huge and black was plunging down. It was close.

It was upon him.

Brownish leathery stuff descended before the car and cut off its headlight-beams. It descended on both sides. The car was in a tent of un-

likely brown flexible material. There were many cords and ropes. Something bulky writhed and struggled. . . .

Then the car's front wheels ran over the edge of the fabric which had dropped about it. There were many strainings. The front wheels took charge. They tried to ride up the fabric side-walls. The fabric should have ripped. It did not. There was a chaotic, nightmarish instant in which the car plunged frantically in a confusion of resistant stuff. If Burt had driven headlong into the open end of a canvas tent with a floor-cloth, and if the material were so strong the car couldn't breast its way through, the feel of things would have been similar.

The ending might have been similar, too. The car reeled over on its side, skidding sickishly on its rear wheels. Burt struggled frantically to steer. Somehow he knew that something else that was alive struggled as frantically as himself.

Then the car overturned and his head hit something solid. He slid into unconsciousness.

Later he had a moment of vague half-consciousness in which his sensations were completely impossible. His

brain felt cold. There was a feeling of chill, of frigidity, inside his mind. Not on the skin or flesh of his skull, but inside! Which of course could not be.

He was thinking absorbedly about the cottage by the lake, and a picture of the cottage flashed through his mind, and he remembered all its rooms as empty, and then he remembered in detail the way to the cottage, and where he turned off on his own driveway, and exactly how to open the door with his key. And he was vaguely bewildered that he was thinking of such things, because he knew that he wanted to find out what had fallen on his car and what had happened to him. But his mind would not work the way he wanted it to. It refused to function normally.

Then it stopped working altogether. He was unconscious again.

He ached all over and his eyes were bandaged when he came back to himself. He heard the chirping of birds. It would be daytime again. He heard somebody moving about in the next room. The covers were tight about his body. He stirred. He knew that all his members responded but there were sundry hurtings that

told him he was bruised. His eyes, though—

He felt a twinge of panic. He struggled to raise his arms to touch the bandage that blinded him.

There was a crash beside the bed. Somebody came running. A voice said:

"Easy, there! Hold everything."

Burt felt himself gently pressed down in the bed again. The voice was masculine and completely familiar, but he couldn't recognize it. It confused and bewildered him.

"Easy!" repeated the voice. Its intonation was matter-of-fact. "You got banged up a little last night. I'm looking after you. You'll be all right. Just lie still a little while longer."

"My—eyes!" panted Burt. They felt all right, but they were bandaged! He sweated in apprehension that he had been blinded.

"Don't worry," said the voice, without emotion. "Just hold everything for half an hour and you can get up."

Burt felt himself held fast. Gently, but he couldn't move. He said shakily:

"Who are you?"

"Smith," said the voice. "John Smith. You don't know me. I'm just looking after you until the doctor gets back and

says you can get up. I found you last night."

The voice was incredibly familiar. He'd heard it over and over again. He recognized it, absolutely. But he didn't know anybody named John Smith. Certainly not anybody who could talk to him in a voice as familiar to him as his own—

Then he did know whose the voice was. He gasped. He knew he was wide-awake, but his just-discovered knowledge was as much like a nightmare as anything could possibly be. He wavered precariously between an hysterically violent reaction, and a paralysis of pure horror. This was insanity! He must be insane! He must be!

The completely known voice said:

"Look, Burt! You just promise to lie still here until the doctor comes, and everything'll be all right."

Burt knew that he was deathly white. He felt that way. He lay still, numb with horror. The voice said:

"Okay? You'll do that?"

Burt didn't move or answer. He couldn't. He was stunned by the recognition of the voice. He seemed, probably, to have fainted. There was a moment's silence, and then a readjustment of the bed-

clothing over him. It tightened. The footsteps went into the next room. And Burt would have done something completely insane if he'd recognized them. But they were not familiar footsteps. The door stayed open. Burt lay absolutely motionless. He was thinking crazily that this couldn't be, and if it was he was out of his head. Because he knew, now, whose voice it was. It was perfectly reasonable that he shouldn't have recognized it at first. Now he did. But it was impossible!

The voice that had spoken to him was his own.

His own voice had called him Burt. His own voice had told him to keep still until the doctor came. And then he, using his own voice, had asked questions, and his own voice in another throat had put him off.

Frozen, he heard small movements in the next room. He stirred with infinite caution—the cunning of the insane, he thought desperately. The cover was tight across his shoulders. When he'd moved, before, something crashed to the floor. One side of the cover was tucked tightly under the mattress. The other must be laid flat on a chair with something heavy

on it. When he stirred, that heavy thing would be upset.

With infinite, frantic care he moved his right arm sideways, not loosening the cover at all. He brought his hand up past his shoulder, flat to the mattress, and turned his face to it. He fumbled at the bandage over his eyes and plucked it away. He could see. There was nothing wrong with his eyesight. There were no scratches from broken glass or anything else about his face. He saw the end of the cover resting on the chair beside his bed. It was devised exactly as he'd expected, so that movement which loosened the cover would pull the bucket on it, and the bucket would fall. It was to give notice when he moved.

But it was easy to defeat. A lunatic could defeat it. Burt had merely to loosen the cover at the other side of the bed, where the mattress held it. He did. He was in his pajamas. He had evidently been put carefully to bed while unconscious.

He got up very quietly, though his teeth tended to chatter. There were noises in the room nearest the lake. This John Smith was doing something there. Burt picked up the bucket as a weapon. It should have been an alarm.

He wasn't sure why he wanted a weapon, because outside the sun shone and birds sang very peacefully, but Burt was in a precarious psychological state. Somebody had blindfolded him and tried to persuade him he was seriously injured. But it was worse than that! The somebody who'd deceived him about his eyes was using Burt's own voice to lie to him with. And Burt felt a crawling horror at that thought.

But he went very softly to the door and peered into the next room.

There was a figure seated in a chair at his own worktable. The figure wore one of his shirts, and a pair of his trousers, and his shoes. It was bent over something at which it labored. There were yards and yards of leathery bronzer-color stuff—not woven fabric—in a heap at one side of the room. The figure was working with pieces cut out of it.

Burt found rage choking him. It was necessary to rage, or he would be frightened. But then the figure's hands lifted something. Burt saw what it was. It was a face, modeled in the leathery material. But it was flexible. It was like a child's rubber-latex Hallowe'en mask, save that it was not grotesque and was of

the unchanged bronze color of its substance. But it was remarkably flexible. It yielded in the figure's hands.

The figure put the face on itself.

Burt made a strangled noise. The figure started up and faced him. It wore the face Burt had just seen in its hands.

And Burt knew the truth, then. He couldn't have put it into words, but it filled him with a sickish horror past all reason. It wasn't even a relief to know that he wasn't crazy. He wanted to be sick. He wanted to explode in murderous fury. He wanted to kill. In fact, a part of his horror came from astonishment—that he hadn't been killed—that he was alive and looking at what he looked at.

Then, his own voice spoke matter-of-factly from across the room. "It looks like you've guessed."

Burt heard words come out of his own mouth. "It was—those lights in the sky," he said thickly. "You!"

The figure seemed to reflect. Then it nodded.

"And the thing I ran into," panted Burt absurdly, "with the car. That was you landing—with a parachute." His voice in his own throat was

strange—and it was good for it to be so. It was unlike the voice of the figure. "You—fell on my car."

The figure said matter-of-factly:

"Yes. I was landing."

"You—you're not a man!" said Burt thickly. "You're not—human!"

"No."

There was a pause. The figure stood and looked at him. Burt felt an ache in his fingers. He had gripped the door-frame so tightly that his whole hand hurt. He loosened it. Then he said in ridiculous vexation:

"But you're wearing my clothes. You talk English!" Then he found himself angry despite his horror. "You're talking with my voice! You've got a hell of a nerve!"

The figure paused. Then it said tonelessly:

"I am a fugitive. I had no clothes like you wear. So I took yours. I planned to hide in the woods when I had finished this face."

"That's not your face, either!" raged Burt. "You copied it from a picture on my work-table! But it isn't colored right. How'd you get my voice? What the hell do you mean, anyhow?"

He listened to his own complaints, amazed at their

irrelevance. But one does not react with calm and reasoned thoughts in the face of the unthinkable as a visible and patent fact. He saw the figure spread out its hands as if somehow it knew that that was an appropriate gesture.

"I was a fugitive," it repeated without any intonation whatever. "I was being chased. I reached your atmosphere. My pursuers were close. I set my ship to go on by itself and I jumped. My pursuers caught my ship and destroyed it. They searched with their—" a pause here—"weapons for me. But I had jumped in time. They did not find me. They may believe I was in my ship when they destroyed it. But they will try to make sure. Therefore I must hide."

Burt's mind went dizzily in several directions at once. A picture in a magazine on the work-table, that was the model for the face. His voice and the use of English he couldn't understand. And there was the fact that this figure had admitted that it was not a human being. But it was intelligent! It was rational!

It happens that the idea of non-human intelligence is the most horrifying of possible

concepts. The idea of a non-human which thinks and talks is the idea of a demon, a ghost, a werewolf, a monster, a devil out of hell. Burt's hair tended to stand on end.

But on the other hand the creature spoke tonelessly, without attempts either to frighten or persuade. It described flight and pursuit and escape. The flashing lights in the sky, last night, and the incredible soundless explosion Burt had seen, were points which checked with its story. But they added up to the statement that Burt was faced in his own living room with a fugitive from space—a member of a race so far beyond men in science or intelligence that they had ships which roamed the stars, and weapons whose nature Burt could guess at.

He sat down abruptly in a chair.

"L-look," he said shakily. "This is—impossible, of course, but all the same . . ."

The figure waited. After a moment it said:

"I did not expect to talk to humans so soon. I thought to have my disguise complete and to be hiding in the woods before you woke. Then you would have been puzzled, and you would be angry, but you would not have seen me."

Then the figure said as tonelessly as before: "I have much to think of and plan."

"If—you're on the run," said Burt jerkily. "It's important that nobody knows you're here and alive?"

"If I am known to have landed, I will be destroyed," said the figure in that extraordinarily prosaic manner. "My pursuers may have ways of learning if my landing is known. I do not know. If they do learn I am alive, they will destroy me even if they have to destroy this world to make sure of it."

Burt said querulously:

"But what do you mean to do?"

"I mean to hide, so your radios will not speak of me or your newspapers know that I exist."

"And after?"

There was a pause as if the creature sought for a gesture or a word that fitted. It shrugged.

"I am on your world not of my own choice. I may never be able to leave it. I have to think."

The figure stood quite unnaturally still and looked at Burt. And he was horrified and repelled, but he was also tormented with curiosity and not wholly capable of coherent thought. He was not sure

he believed the alien's story, but nobody else would believe in the alien's existence. He needed to do some thinking himself.

"I could do with a chance to think too," said Burt uneasily. "I take it you've told me this much because you don't want me to tell anybody you're here until you've had time to make some decisions."

The figure nodded its head.

"I'm pretty dizzy," Burt told him, "but I know well enough that if I tried to persuade anybody that a man from Mars—or wherever you're from—had paid me a visit, they'd lock me up. I think you're safe from babbling on my part! But I'm not too clear-headed just now. Suppose you go off in the woods and do your thinking. Come back here tonight. We'll talk things over, then, when we both are able to—have a little perspective on it. Right?"

He desperately wanted the creature to get out of his sight just now. He wanted to be in a normal world when he thought about incredible things. He still did not quite believe his eyes and ears.

The figure—it had the build of an athletic man, and Burt's clothes fitted it rather well—

prosaically began to make a bundle of the plastic brown material from which it had made itself a face and hands, and very probably other elements of a humanoid body as well. But it moved deftly enough. It made a surprisingly small bundle of the fabric that had been its parachute. It moved to the door. Then it paused.

"I should tell you," said the figure tonelessly, "that I have the usual emergency weapons of my race. I will not allow myself to be made a captive. If necessary, I can explode what you call an atom bomb."

Burt's mouth dropped open. The figure nodded carefully, as if conscious that this was the proper gesture to make. It reached inside Burt's shirt, which it was wearing. It brought out a small, misshapen metal object. It showed the object to Burt and put it away again and went out of the door. Through the window Burt saw it move away toward the woods.

Birds sang loudly in the sunshine.

Norma was at the swimming-place when Burt found her. All the summer boarders and people whose cottages did not front on the lake came to the incorporated village for

their swimming. There were diving-boards and diving-towers, a fenced-off shallow area for small children, and spaces and facilities where lovers of the out-of-doors in summer could anoint themselves with sun-tan oil, wear dark glasses, and make acquaintances if they hadn't any, and snub unneeded acquaintances if they had. The lake was a very normal sort of vacation resort.

Today the sky was beautifully blue, and there were cotton-wool clouds in the sky. There were squealings and laughter from those who swam in the lake, and there was a humming of talk from those who sat at tables and drank soft drinks and either took pleasure in the act, or else enjoyed themselves by pretending to be bored. Everything was quite appropriate for the pleasure of people temporarily without cares.

Norma splashed cheerfully to shore when Burt arrived. "Aren't you swimming?" she asked in surprise.

He shook his head, speechless. She swung up to the platform and sat there, dripping and with the sunlight shining on her wetted skin. She regarded him with her head cocked on one side.

"You sounded queer this morning," she observed. "All you said was yes and no. Even when I told you I'd be here."

"I sounded queer—" Burt tensed. "You talked to me?"

"Naturally!" said Norma. "You remember! I phoned that a gang was going on a picnic and that we'd stop at your cottage for you if you'd go. All you said was no. Then I said I didn't care much about the picnic, myself, and would you be along here, and you said yes." She looked at his face and flushed. She said awkwardly: "I didn't really care about the picnic."

Burt found his hands clenched tightly.

"You weren't talking to me," he said in a strangled voice.

"But I was!" Then Norma stopped short. She said with some constraint. "I—the last thing you said last night was something about today. That's why I called. I misunderstood, I guess."

She moved to slip overboard again, but Burt said:

"Hold it!" He swallowed. "It wasn't me you talked to. It was somebody—" He hesitated. The figure wearing his clothes and using his voice was not exactly a somebody, but a something. He went on, "It was somebody who sound-

ed like me, pretending to be me. I didn't know you telephoned. I . . ."

Then his voice failed him. In this particular place, with such completely ordinary activities all about, it struck him very forcibly indeed that what had happened last night and this morning was not exactly credible.

"L-look," he said unsteadily. "I was certain I wasn't crazy, just now, but what I remember is! Come along a moment, will you?"

He led the way from the swimming-space to his car. Norma followed, stepping carefully in her bare feet. Burt's teeth chattered suddenly. He pointed to the mudguards of his car. They were bent but not scratched.

"On the way to the cottage last night," said Burt constrainedly, "after I left you, I ran into something. The car turned over. You can see the dents."

Norma stared, and turned to him in quick concern:

"Burt! Were you hurt?"

He looked at the dents. There was not a single scratch on the paint. The leathery stuff, of course, had not prevented denting, but it had protected the paint against abrasion.

"Did you ever see dents like

those?" he demanded. "It looks as if there'd been something like a cloth protecting the paint when the dents were made, doesn't it?"

"Why, yes," agreed Norma. "What happened?"

He told her about something huge and dark falling swiftly from the sky and overwhelming the car. Sweat stood out on his forehead. There were people all about. There were the half-dozen stores of the village, with perfectly commonplace customers going in and out of them. There was everyday sunshine and trees looked as they had always looked. People ate hot dogs, and children consumed ice-cream cones, and back at the water's edge a squealing, laughing struggle took place as somebody tried to push somebody else overboard, and there was a splash as both contestants fell into the water together. It was completely natural and commonplace. Burt's story seemed inconceivable in such a setting. He stopped the tale at the point where he'd been knocked unconscious.

Norma stared at him, paling. Droplets of lake-water still stood on her tanned skin. She was the only human being to whom Burt would have

dared tell even so much, though he had known her only a week. But she had seen the lights in the sky, last night, and anyhow it is possible to feel remarkably close to a person like Norma in a week.

"Does that sound crazy?" he demanded when he'd finished.

She shook her head.

"Did you see the morning paper?" she asked in turn. "It said that there were stories of streaks of light in the sky last night. It said that phenomena like northern lights were rare as far south as this, but that they aren't unknown. I wondered if the lights we saw were auroral displays. But from what *you* say . . ."

"They weren't," said Burt.

"Then the thing that fell out of the sky on your car . . ."

"If you'll get dressed," he told her, "I'll show you where it happened. It came from a ship up there. Maybe it was a hundred miles high, at the very edge of the atmosphere. But there was a ship: —I'm going to make a phone call," he added abruptly. "Maybe I can find out something useful. Meet me here?"

She smiled at him quickly and moved away. Just as a man can find it possible to tell

a girl his inmost and most private thoughts after knowing her only a week, a girl can find possible the most unquestioning obedience, within limits, in a similar length of time.

Burt made the phone-call. He was back at the parked car when Norma came out, immaculate though her hair was wetted a little where the edge of her swimming-cap had been. He opened the car-door in silence. He started the motor and backed out from the curb.

"I just telephoned the FBI, long-distance," he told her. "I said I was a science-fiction writer, asking for information."

"Why?"

"If you say you're a writer," he said detachedly, "it's expected that the information you ask for will be on the wacky side. And you get all sorts of cooperation. It works anywhere. I told the FBI I was working on a story and explained that the character in my yarn needed to convince the FBI that he had encountered an alien from outer space. And I asked what sort of evidence he'd need, to appear somebody who wasn't a crackpot telling a story that shouldn't be true. Fellow at the FBI office gave me some

good advice on how to make the thing convincing. Said to let him know when the yarn was printed."

Norma frowned a little. "Encountered . . ."

"Yes," said Burt grimly. "I'm going to try to find proof to convince the FBI that I did encounter a creature from another world, who landed on Earth from a space-ship. I did. The thing that dropped on my car was a parachute, and a creature was in it."

Driving out of the village, he told her the rest of his story—from the instant he waked in his own bed, blindfolded, until the creature that spoke with his own voice went away—so it said—to hide in the woods until nightfall.

"I told it it needn't fear my talking," added Burt coldly, "because nobody would believe me. I didn't really believe it myself. How could a creature tumbling down out of the sky speak English? But no actual man could duplicate my voice! Something happened, and the only plausible guess happens to be lunatic. So I'm going to try to get evidence to convince the FBI—whose business it would be to handle anything as important as possible information about space-travel—and let them take

over from there. I don't want any part of the business for myself!"

Norma shivered a little. But she said quietly:

"If you were—abnormal, Burt, you wouldn't be willing to allow for doubt. You'd resent anybody not believing you. But instead you act just the way a person should when up against something that's been thought impossible."

"Thanks," said Burt drily.

He drove. Norma frowned a little, beside him. He drove along the exact way he'd followed the night before. The highway curved and curved, encircling the lake. There were trees which thickened into woodland through which the car rolled. There were little driveways branching off, with mail-boxes at the turn-offs. They led to the lake-shore cottages. There was the aromatic smell of pines, and the sound of insects, and there were faint, faint bird-calls, and now and again a shingled cottage with an encircling screened porch.

Burt pulled off to the side of the road and stopped the car. He got out. Norma joined him. He said grimly:

"These marks—" he pointed— "are where I went off the road. There's no pattern of the tread, because my tires

were running on that brown stuff I told you about. The parachute. Here's where the car turned over."

In the soft mould the mark of the car's toppled body was clear. There were leaves and twigs pressed flat. There was the cut-off stump of a six-inch tree. It was plainly the thing that had made the deepest dent in the car.

"The car turned over all right, you see," said Burt. "Now, how did it get turned back on its wheels?"

He searched. Presently he pointed, without saying a word. There were two deep indentations in the soft earth. If a man were strong enough to lift at the side of a toppled light car, and set it upright again, the place where he planted his feet would show deep footmarks from the weight. But not many human beings could do such a thing as had been done with Burt's car.

On the other hand, these weren't human footprints.

Norma shivered a little.

"Unfortunately," said Burt coldly, "there's no detail. Maybe the creature was wearing something on the order of shoes."

He hesitated a moment. Then he said frowning:

"I'm pretty well convinced I'm not crazy, Norma. Especially since you don't seem to think I am. But I'm going to need evidence to convince the FBI that I'm not cracked. And there's the fact that if things go right I'll want you to back my story of the lights in the sky—but if they go wrong I want you away from here. Well away from here! That's important."

Norma said uneasily:

"You're thinking of what it said about an atom bomb?"

He nodded.

"But Burt," she said more uneasily still. "You don't *want* to be involved in this! It isn't really your affair. If you decided to finish your vacation somewhere else, couldn't you just drop the whole matter?"

He shook his head.

"There's a slight patriotic obligation," he said drily. "The creature came here in a space-ship. Its pursuers were after it in other space-ships. They had weapons which apparently broke down air into atomic flame, and when they hit this creature's ship they disintegrated it. We humans, and specifically our own government, do not know how to make space-ships or weapons like that. This creature does. It would be good if our gov-

ernment found out how to make such things—from it."

Norma listened, unhappily.

"Another point of view," said Burt. "The thing's a fugitive. It's in danger from its pursuers, it says. Even more, it's in danger from humans. What do you think would happen if unwarned human beings discovered something that wasn't human going around among human-kind? They'd panic, at best. At worst they'd try to kill it out of pure fear. And it would defend itself. It has what it calls emergency weapons. It spoke of an atom bomb, which might be possible or might not." He spread out his hands. "I've got to prevent that if I can."

Norma said reluctantly:

"What are you going to do, then?"

"Take you to a safe place. Write out what I know. Leave it with you. Come back and try to get proof that'll satisfy the FBI that they'd better come along and make contact with the creature and make some sort of bargain with it. If there's an explosion or other unhappy events, you take my written account to the FBI anyhow. Understand?"

Norma's forehead creased.

"You'll lose a lot of

time . . ." Then she said uneasily, "You arranged to meet it in your cottage after dark, Burt. It's hiding in the woods now. If you hope to find some proof in your cottage, why not go now, right away, while it's gone? If you do find anything, by nightfall you could have somebody convinced and back here with you."

It looked like a highly practical suggestion. It looked right. If even a scrap of proof of the creature's existence remained at the cottage, by nightfall he could have made contact with confidential branches of the government. He could be back with somebody prepared to offer protection and secrecy in exchange for the information the alien creature possessed. An atom bomb that a man could carry in his hand . . . the knowledge of space-drives and weapons it could give . . .

"I'll risk ten minutes at the cottage," said Burt slowly. "If I don't find anything then, I take you off somewhere and do as I said." He looked sharply at her. "Take you back to the village first?"

She shook her head. She wouldn't be much safer in the village, anyhow. He got back in the car and drove on past

the clearing. The highway was still narrow. It meandered, and sometimes the lake was visible through tree, and sometimes it was not. They saw a newly-painted canoe turned upside down to let its coating dry. A row of bathing suits on a line.

He reached the turn-off to his own cottage. A bare hundred yards, and the lake was clearly visible. The house was exactly as he had left it. He turned the car completely about before he stopped the motor.

"For a quick getaway if we need it," he said curtly. "Wait here. If you hear voices, drive like mad for town—and keep going!"

But Norma, shivering, turned off the ignition and got out.

"I'm afraid of the idea of being alone," she said apologetically. "I'd rather come in too."

Burt opened the door. For an instant it seemed to him that he smelled a faint—a very faint—unfamiliar scent which was practically undetectable. He wrinkled his nostrils, and it was gone. He went quickly and grimly through every room. Empty. He opened drawers and closets, quickly. He came back to Norma.

"He's still hiding," said Burt, "and he didn't leave anything stored where I can find it. But he was working here."

He went to the work-table. He found half a dozen very tiny scraps of the brown plastic material. It was as thick as thick wrapping-paper, but as flexible as tissue. Yet when he tugged at it it seemed not to give at all. It would be enormously strong, because his car had not been able to tear it. And such strength with such unbelievable flexibility was impossible to human technology. Anything as strong as this—

"This will probably do," he said in satisfaction. "We've nothing like this!"

"L-let's go, then," said Norma. "I'm frightened, Burt."

They started for the door. A shadow moved outside. And Burt's own voice said tonelessly:

"Hold it."

The figure filled the exit. It was the alien. It stood in the doorway and, silhouetted so, it looked remarkably human. It had the masculine features of a magazine illustration. It wore Burt's clothing.

But suddenly it was appalling. It was ghastly. It was horrifying! When it opened its mouth, its teeth were

brown. Its lips were of the same color as its forehead. It suddenly looked like a bronze statue intolerably alive and clothed and moving.

And it spoke tonelessly in Burt's own voice:

"That is Norma. You will have to tell me what you plan."

Norma shrank into Burt's arms, speechless. The face and lips and teeth which were all one color made the thing which called itself John Smith a visible impossibility, visibly unhuman and as monstrous to look at as the thing out of space which it happened to be.

It moved toward them, now. Its eyes did not blink. They were uncanny. Their fixed, unintermittent regard was terrifying.

Burt swung Norma behind him and faced the thing in a sort of fury.

"Dammit!" he cried fiercely. "You're scaring her!"

The figure said tonelessly: "She would not be afraid of me if you had not told her what I am. Put her in a chair."

It continued to move forward. Burt experienced the startled realization that it expected him to get out of its way, just as a man expects a

dog to make way. Norma shuddered uncontrollably at the nearer approach of the thing from space. She might scream if it approached too closely. Burt turned and seated her in the one easy chair the living room of the cottage contained. He stood protectively before her, bristling.

"What do you want?" he demanded. "What's the matter? Why'd you come back here before dark?"

The figure spoke, again without inflections. Its brown teeth and brown lips and brown tongue made it seem demoniac, as if a statue had become possessed by a demon which used it as a body.

"I have been examining the memories I took from your mind when your car turned over," it said in its flat voice. "I cannot know what you have thought, but I know what you have seen and heard and done up to the time I took your memories. I have been learning your language and your civilization from that information. And I reasoned that you would come and try to get proof that I have landed on this world. You should wish to give that proof to your rulers."

Burt ground his teeth. The thing had examined his memories? How? Then he began

to feel a ghastly helplessness. For a first instant, of course, he did not distinguish between knowing his memories and knowing his thoughts. The alien's statement actually meant that he had been able to extract from Burt's brain-cells the recorded sensory data on which his mind had worked, but not the working of his mind on the sensory-data. The thing from space did not abruptly possess himself of all Burt's knowledge. It had still to learn exactly as a baby learns, by comparing sense-perceptions with each other and abstracting ideas. But it had Burt's remembered sense-perceptions to learn from. Just as it had memories of Burt's voice to duplicate. It was duplicating Burt's voice now.

"It seems that you have done as I reasoned," said the creature without emotion. "But I cannot allow you to prove that I exist. I am in danger. You endanger me."

"You'll be damned unsafe," said Burt fiercely, "if you try to pass as a man!"

"Now, yes," it agreed. "But I know it. I have not examined all your memories."

Burt said nothing. He was staggered, but he glared. Norma held fast to his hands, breathing in a panicky tempo.

"And," said the creature from space, completely without expression, "you humans are strange. I have decided that there may well be humans in communication with my enemies, keeping their arrangement a secret from other humans, that they may profit by it. If there are such spies of my enemies among you humans, they will search for me. Here. So I must go away."

Burt did not cease to glare, but he began to hope. Norma was here. For himself, he was angrily ready to take chances. But the obligation to see Norma safely away was greater than any other obligation could possibly be.

"All right then," snapped Burt. "Go away! Nobody'd believe us if we told our story, anyhow!"

But his mind leaped ahead to what he'd be able to report to the FBI. If the scraps of plastic weren't too good as evidence, still his story and Norma's and the blunders the creature was sure to make——

"You will come with me," said the alien without emphasis. "You will be convenient for me, for a time."

Burt felt cold. But there was Norma. He clenched his

hands. After all, the thing did have what it said was an atom bomb. If it had landed from space, and the drama in the sky had been its escape from its pursuers, he couldn't risk Norma's life on a guess that it bluffed about emergency weapons. Men would take emergency weapons along if they were forced to land on what to them would be a savage and a hostile world.

"I've got other plans," said Burt shortly. "What would I gain by helping you?"

If the creature needed him, he'd play hard to get. Make a bargain for knowledge; scientific information to pass on for human use.

But the alien did not answer. It was carefully examining exactly the place that Burt had just searched, for scraps of the brown plastic. It found a few morsels he'd missed. It moved to put them somewhere which was not where the pockets of Burt's clothes were. It corrected its mistake. It ignored Burt's query. He repeated it.

"I said, what would I get out of helping you?"

The so-human head turned with its utterly unhuman, un-winking regard.

"You do not understand," it said flatly. "Humans kill rats and mice because they

are inconvenient. They keep dogs because they are convenient. You are intelligent. You can choose to be convenient or not. You will tell me now."

Completely without emotion, it reached inside the shirt it wore and brought out the exotically shaped metal object it had indicated was a weapon. It was convincingly without feeling one way or another.

"We will go now," it said flatly.

It did not care. Burt felt a raging humiliation because it would kill him with neither regret or elation. But he said urgently:

"You just sit here, Norma, and—don't tell anybody anything about this. They wouldn't believe you, anyhow."

The figure said as indifferently as before:

"She may be convenient. She will come also."

"No!" raged Burt. "No! You shan't——"

"I can kill her," said the alien without interest. "It does not matter."

Norma stood up. She sobbed just once. She moved very stiffly. She groped for Burt's arm and clung to it. She moved jerkily. She walked out of the house. Burt moved with her, to steady and

support her. The thing followed them out. It went to the cover of the well from which the cottage water-supply was drawn. It lifted the cover with an ease which spoke of terrifying physical strength.

"For your information," it said, "you will look."

It pointed its metal object down toward the water in the well. There was a sudden flash of intolerable brightness from the weapon. The creature drew back its hand. And steam roared up out of the well in a monstrous gush that rose tree-top high. It rolled and curled among the upper branches.

"Now," said the creature, "you will drive."

Burt took the wheel. He felt utterly sickened. Norma sat beside him, her face like chalk. The creature got into the back of the car.

"Drive westward," it commanded coldly. "I will stay out of sight. My face is not properly colored yet." Then it added matter-of-factly, "You understand what I will do if I am inconvenienced."

It sank down impossibly to the floor of the back of the car. Norma looked at it. Her expression became one of utter horror. Burt stared down. The body that had looked so human, looked human

no longer. It had folded in upon itself. It had no bones. The flexible mask which was its face had visibly become detached from whatever was behind it. For its own idea of comfort, the fugitive from space had ceased to fill the legs of the trousers and the sleeves of the shirt. It was impossible to guess what its normal shape might be. It looked simply shapeless.

But its voice came up from the floor-boards. Burt's voice.

"Drive westward. And I shall not want attention drawn to this car."

From the mass, the mound, the blob of whatever-it-was inside the collapsed garments, the voice which was Burt's own sounded like something out of a madman's nightmare.

Burt drove away, his hands clenched tightly on the wheel. Norma sat stiffly beside him, her cheeks like marble.

Before dusk fell, Burt said in a low tone to Norma:

"We'll need some gas soon. If I were alone, I'd let the car run out of it. But—when I stop for gas, you get out and walk around. To powder your nose—anything. Try to slip away."

They were then better than a hundred miles from the lake and the place where the alien

had landed. They had come partly through the mountains in whose foothills the vacation resort was located. They rode along a wide smooth highway, with some mountains against the setting sun, but western foothills visible between them.

Norma licked her lips. Four hours of driving, without a word or movement of the creature in the back of the car. Nothing had happened to reassure her, but it is not possible to sustain an acute emotion of any sort for a very long time. The hysterical horror which had cowed her as much as fear had become merely a numbed dread.

Burt showed greater signs of strain. He felt not only responsibility for Norma's safety, but that it was through him that the alien was clothed and partly disguised, and might ultimately become able to conceal itself, with untoward results for all human beings. The creature might be a criminal among its own kind. It might have been pursued by interstellar avengers in the nature of police. If it were a criminal, and could hide on Earth and ultimately escape, Earth might become a galactic hideout for criminals of its stripe, ultimately

to be destroyed simply to root them out. On the other hand, there might be legal warfare among the stars, and the creature might draw upon Earth the destructive weapons of a galactic civilization, or—even worse—make Earth in some sort a military base for the interstellar nation it belonged to.

But meanwhile the car hummed along the highway. Burt's throat was dry. He tried despairingly to think, but he had no material to think about. The creature knew too much. It knew all he had ever seen or done. While he was unconscious it had somehow drained his brain of all its memories, which would have been the cause of the incredible sensation of coldness inside his skull when he woke and found his thinking controlled to absorbed remembering. It would have been the creature seeking ruthlessly for a place to hide. Which it had found.

There was a highway sign, "One and one-half miles to Service Area." That would be gas-pumps and a restaurant and a shop where oil could be changed and repairs made. Norma might be able to get into the restaurant. She might—she might!—be able to escape. But somehow he,

Burt, must manage to destroy the alien or at the least disarm or disable him: in some fashion remove the danger the alien created by its mere existence alive and at liberty on Earth.

Ahead, the red sun touched the edge of the world. There was the fragrance of growing things in the breeze that blew past the car's windows. Another sign. It said, "*½ Mile to Service Area.*"

Burt said thickly:

"We need gas. If we are to go much further I should stop and buy more."

There were sounds in the back of the car. A shoe scraped. Something was pushed aside. Burt knew that the thing in the back was flowing from shapelessness into the legs and arms and simulacrum of a face and head that lay on the floor behind him. He could imagine it too vividly. He wanted to be sick.

Then there were stirrings. He felt a hand—he knew it would look like a hand: it was shaped like one—grasp the seat-back by his shoulder. Norma shuddered, but did not look. Burt felt that the thing had raised itself and now sat human-fashion on the back seat. To a casual glance, in twilight, it would look human

enough. To Burt it was perhaps more horrible for that very reason.

"I have been examining the memories I took last night," said the creature tranquilly. "You need money to pay for the gasoline. Do you have it?"

Burt nodded, fighting against the nausea his mental picture of a moment before had produced.

Burt drove on. Half a mile beyond, there was a turn-off to a filling-station with an elaborate restaurant behind it. Burt drove to a gas-pump. His voice was strained as he ordered gas. Norma did not stir. With his hand held so that it was not visible from the back, he gestured urgently for her to get out of the car—of course assuming that she would make some excuse.

She sat still, trembling. Once he saw her move as if to try to rise, but it was as if her legs would not support her.

The pump-bell clanged and clanged. Then the tank was full. Burt paid. The attendant wiped off the windshield. Burt drove out of the service area and back on the highway.

A long time after—when it was dark—Burt said desperately:

"Have you decided where you want me to drive you?"

Somehow it had not been possible to question the creature while it lay withdrawn into shapelessness on the floor of the car. When it had human form, horrible as it was, it was at least possible to address it.

His own voice came back to him.

"I have made plans." Then, suddenly, the voice ceased to be toneless. "Your memories, on careful examination, tell me that I have not fully spoken your language. There are not only words, but tones. From now on, I shall vary this voice as you do. I shall practice. You will listen and tell me when I do not speak quite like a human being."

Burt swallowed, dry-throated.

"Now I shall speak pleasantly," said the voice. And it did. Its intonation became cordial: "I realize now how Norma knew I was not a man. The teeth of my face are not bright. From your memories I think the inside of the mouth should have a different look. The skin that shows should look differently. And your memories say that there is make-up to change the look of the skin, and it can be bought in drug-stores. You will find a town. I wish you to buy the make-up that will

make this face look quite human."

The tone, by its inappropriate cordiality, made the whole speech a grisly performance. And there was an odd uncertainty in the use of words substituted for color.

Burt drove on. The sky overhead grew darker. Stars appeared. There were shadows in the underbrush and woods beside the road. They turned slowly black. Burt saw Norma moving on the seat beside him. Suddenly she gave a little cry.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"I—I can move again!" she gasped. "At the filling station I couldn't!"

The now-pleasant voice from the back of the car said:

"I used a very small power-charge so that she could not rise. It has worn off now. I did not want her to run away. It would have been inconvenient for me to have to destroy the filling-station and restaurant. My pursuers might learn of it if they have spies among you humans."

Burt drove and drove and drove. Other cars showed headlights, some bright and some dim. Burt's mind had practically ceased to work rationally. He had considered

violating traffic laws so that a motorcycle policeman would stop him. But the alien's weapon—judged by the flash of fire down the well—was deadly. To attract attention of the police would mean simply the death of a policeman. He had thought of crashing head-on into another car or running it over a cliff or through the guard-rail of a bridge. He would have been willing to get himself killed, in such a desperate measure, but there was Norma. His ability to think was exhausted. He couldn't work out anything more.

Cars, coming from the opposite direction, made occasional rushing sounds as they flowed along the road toward Burt, and then boomed gustily past. The highway curved through longer, easier curvings as the foothills grew less. It rolled up and down grades that were less and less noticeable.

Half an hour after leaving the filling-station, there were twinklings of light yet miles away against the dark horizon.

"There's a town ahead," said Burt, wearily. He wasn't afraid, now. The sensation of fear was worn out. "You want me to stop at a drug-store."

The voice behind him said cordially:

"I will sit in the car. With Norma. But first stop the car beside the road at some convenient place."

"What——?"

"I wish to demonstrate something, said the voice. "So you will understand why you must do as I say. I shall not hurt either of you."

Burt felt shame. It was deep humiliation to be commanded by a creature which was not even human. He had not the sick hatred that would have come of knowing he was afraid. He wasn't. He knew that he was capable of doing anything, up to and including getting himself killed, if only it dealt fully with the fugitive from space. All the pride that humans take for granted in their superiority to all other living things, was outraged by this being's attitude. It regarded humans as vermin, like rats or mice. It would make use of them as humans made use of dogs. And to Burt it had become much less important to stay alive than to justify his humanity.

He turned off the concrete onto the road's turfed shoulder. The highway ran through a deep cut, here. He stopped

the car. The motor idled. There was the sound of night-things, and stars shone overhead, and somewhere a night-bird called. There was the feel of life all about. The grass and trees and even the cut-away stone of the hillside seemed alive and familiar. But the thing in the back—that was purest, hackle-raising, hateable alienness. A frightening thing.

It stirred, on the rear seat. With uncanny deftness it cranked down the window on the side next the road.

"I told you," it said cordially, "that I had an emergency weapon. Your race has not yet begun to understand atomic energy. And you, Burt, have been thinking of ways to destroy me. So I show you my weapon. It releases energy under close control, from so little that Norma did not feel the beam that paralyzed her, to all the energy of its fuel-store at one instant. And it is much more efficient than your uranium bombs, Burt."

Burt waited dully. He was not really aware of any emotion except exhaustion and a hatred that was so deep-rooted that it was as much a part of him as his name. It was pure, primeval instinct to hate anything which dared to put itself on equality with

man. And this creature set itself above!

The headlights shone on the rocky side-wall of the cut. The road curved on ahead. There were the multitudinous sounds of the night. The creature said placidly:

"My speaking should be more human now. Is it?"

Burt said harshly: "Yes."

He waited. Nothing happened. Only the night-noises and the night-smells, and the sound of the idling motor. But there came a grumbling sound. It was a motor-truck, approaching around the curve and climbing a hill.

The truck's headlights came around the curve. It was a huge, aluminum-painted oil-truck. There were huge, red, black-bordered letters on its side, spelling out GASOLINE. It reached the top of the grade, and Burt heard its gears shift, and it came on. It went past on the other side of the highway, rumbling and clanking and roaring as such trucks do.

The thing in the back moved its arm, clad in the sleeve of Burt's shirt. A metal object glinted. There was a flash of unbearably brilliant light.

The gasoline-truck burst into flame from one end to

the other. Its tank body shattered. A flood of flaming liquid spouted skyward and went racing over the highway and splashed against the walls of the cut. There was a lake of leaping flames which made the highway and its rocky sidewalls brighter than day.

And the truck rolled onward. Fallen flaming gasoline drenched its cab and hood and burned man-height high before it. Running burning gasoline flowed along beside it.

It rolled and rolled and rolled, sending thirty-foot flames skyward, moving in the middle of an inferno. The highway straightened. The truck continued to curve. It ran off the concrete and into a ditch and stopped there, burning.

Burt had the door of the car open to rush to the aid of the driver. He could not hope to do anything, but the action was automatic.

"The driver is dead," said his own voice from the back of the car. "The energy killed him as it blasted the truck. Get back in the car."

Burt plunged toward the flames.

His arms and legs—his whole body—became as water. He felt himself tumbling to

the concrete. Norma cried out. Burt lay on the road. He had no feeling in any of his members. He could only see and hear.

The voice said placidly:

"Get back in the car."

The power of motion returned to Burt's limbs and body. He panted incoherently at the thing from space, his fists clenched as he staggered upright. The voice said tonelessly:

"I will be inconvenienced if I need to throw you in the flames. Get in the car."

Norma cried out pleadingly. And Burt came out of a moment of fury so horrible as to be unrememberable. The truck burned terribly, but there was no outcry from inside it. There had been none. If the driver had been alive, at the least there would have been screams.

Burt gasped and choked and panted almost unintelligibly:

"I'll kill you for this! I'll kill you! I'll kill——"

"Get in the car!" cried Norma shrilly. "Please! For my sake!"

And the idea of Norma alone with the creature and purest horror was the one thing that could move Burt just then. He stumbled toward the car. He did not want to.

He would have preferred to be killed. But there was Norma, and there was the other fact that if he were killed nobody but Norma would know that the creature from space did exist and was on Earth.

He slid under the wheel, drunk with hatred.

"Drive on, now," said the alien.

Burt drove on, his hands shaking and tightening convulsively.

The creature in the back said calmly:

"I have studied your memories. I think you plan to disobey me. Whenever I think you plan to disobey me I shall kill a human. You will blame yourself. You will be right. If you do disobey me I will kill you and all other humans nearby."

Burt's teeth clamped together as he drove. He was half-blind with rage. Beside him, Norma trembled. The car went on and on and on. They passed a car coming from the direction in which they were headed. It would encounter the still-burning tank-truck. A little later, they passed an interrurban bus, bound the same way. A fierce hope sprang up in Burt that when the truck was discovered——

But there had been no missile. A blast of pure heat—pure energy—had exploded and ignited the truck's cargo. Examination of the burned-out shell would tell nothing to men who did not even suspect that a weapon like the alien's could exist.

There was simply no answer to the situation.

Miles later—and here the land was nearly flat—the lights of the town glittered very near. Here the traffic was heavier. There were many cars on the highway. As the town drew nearer and nearer, highway-speed could no longer be maintained. Burt found himself trailing another car. Its brake-lights flashed on. Burt slowed sharply.

A fast truck came roaring out of the town. It had the regulation headlights, and extra bright red warning-lights which flicked on and off beside them. Traffic bunched and pulled aside to give it right of way. It went rushing past, the red warning-lights securing it right of way. Its noise diminished toward the highway cut in which the truck had exploded. It had been discovered—still burning—and help telephoned for. The traffic near the town re-

sumed its normal speed, once the rescue-truck had gone on its way.

His voice came from the creature in the back.

"I do not identify that truck from your memories," said the voice. "Why did the other cars make way for it?"

Burt had not seen red warning-lights used in exactly that arrangement before, but of course he knew its purpose.

"It's a rescue truck," he said, hating. "It's going to try to help the poor devil you killed back yonder. They'll be too late, but they'll try."

There was a pause. Burt's features were drawn and savage. The alien said reflectively:

"It is not in your memories. How did you know?"

"The blinking lights," snapped Burt. "They were red. It couldn't be anything else."

"Red," said the thing in the back. "That is what you call a color. Colors are important to you humans?"

"To us humans, yes," said Burt harshly.

Silence again. The town was very near. Houses appeared on either side of the highway. Street-lights. The alien pressed itself into the darkest corner.

"Here you will buy the col-

ors for my face and skin," it said tonelessly once more.

"I will buy it," agreed Burt in the very quintessence of quiet hate. "I will not give you an excuse to kill anybody else. There's a drug-store ahead. I'm going to buy grease-paint and lipstick and powder. I have money to pay for it."

The creature said: "I know. Your memories have told me of the need for money, now that I am on your world. First I need to make this face look just right."

The car was actually in the town by this time. For two or three blocks there was a narrow street with residences rising abruptly from the sidewalk-line. The traffic here ran bumper-to-bumper. Side-streets were wider, and Burt could tell that many were tree-lined, with branches meeting above the pavement. The air was full of the smell of engine-exhausts. Ahead, traffic-lights glinted red and green and there was a brightness which would be the business section of whatever town this might be. There would certainly be a drug-store here.

The way widened at the first traffic light, and here was the most miniature of great White Ways—a movie theater with a brilliantly

lighted marquee, an hotel with a sign; stores, a confectionary—open—a bakery. There was a drug-store on a street corner.

Burt turned off the main street and stopped and parked just beyond the turn. He could look into the side windows of the drug-store and see the customers. Two giggling teen-age girls, consuming sodas. A fat woman, without a hat, waiting for a prescription. Behind the car, on the main street, was an unending sound of traffic.

Burt got out of the car and went into the drug-store. The commonplaceness, the complete normality of the scene and the people around him, was so strange as to be shocking. Here were the smells of ice-cream flavoring and perfume and antiseptics and newsprint from the magazine-stand, all blended together into a perfectly typical well-known odor. These people were thinking about everyday things—where they had come from, where they'd go next, what so-and-so had said—without any doubt about the permanence of all familiar things.

But outside, in the car, there was a creature who regarded all human beings as vermin. Burt had a sense of

unreality, of an insistent disbelief in the reality of things. This small town was reality. Enormous emptinesses between stars, and strange worlds from which ships made voyages, and creatures with not even permanent shapes of their own—they were preposterous!

But when the druggist came to wait on him, Burt heard himself asking for grease-paint and lipstick and powder and eyebrow pencil and a mirror. For what amounted to a make-up kit to cause a plastic mask to look human.

As he picked his wares, the druggist offered a lipstick with a red faked jewel in its top. The faceted glass glittered redly. And suddenly Burt realized an overwhelmingly important fact of which he hadn't been aware before. It was that the alien absolutely, positively, certainly could never hope to pass for a human being among humans without the help of some human being that it trusted! Any captive it might secure could always make the alien betray itself! Not one could ever fail to learn of his power to unmask the thing from emptiness! The alien had to have human friends to survive. Friends!

Because it was color-blind. It knew that colors existed. It had somehow absorbed all of Burt's sensory memories. But it could not perceive colors, itself. It had not been able to tell that the flashing lights on the rescue-truck were red ones. It had asked if colors were important.

It could not possibly learn to use make-up so that the job would deceive a human eye, because its eyes were different from human ones! And very probably it could not even grasp the significance of variations in tints—it could not perceive!

Burt paid for the make-up and went out to the car again. Norma was sobbing quietly to herself. She gasped in relief when Burt came back. She clutched his arm and held on to it.

"I was so—frightened!" she gasped. "If I'm ever left alone with it again, I'll die!"

Burt started the motor. He said grimly, over his shoulder:

"I've got the make-up for your mask and hands. Where shall I drive you now?"

He saw the bronze-colored face in the rear-view mirror. Its eyes were fixed upon him.

"Drive to some secluded place," said the alien placidly,

"where I can make myself convincingly human. Then I will tell you of an enterprise to get the money you use and that I need. I will need a great deal."

Burt drove. Around the block, and when a green light showed he got back into the stream of through traffic. There was no conversation. There were only the sounds of the traffic and once a sudden blaring of music which was probably a car radio in passing.

The last traffic-light. Beyond it, speeds rose. The cars drew apart. The highway went out of town, and presently bored through farmland and woodland and once past a marshy meadow in which frogs croaked resonantly to the stars. They came upon occasional side-roads. Most of them obviously led to farm-houses, but presently Burt braked abruptly. There was a cart-track, unpaved and barely marked by wheels, which led into a second-growth pine-thicket. Burt inspected it in the bright yellow light of the headlights.

"This looks like a suitable make-up room," he said grimly. "A little way in, you should be invisible. You'd use the dome light for your artwork."

"You may drive in," said the voice behind him.

Burt entered in low gear. Weeds grew in the middle. Three-inch and four-inch and five-inch saplings crowded close to the track on either hand. The abandoned road turned this way and that. Two hundred yards in, Burt stopped and switched off the headlights. He turned off the motor. The musical sounds of a summer night came in the car's open windows. The traffic on the highway was still audible, but not even a glint of headlights came through the trees.

Burt switched on the light inside the car and presented his purchases to the bronze-colored figure in the rear seat, which looked so much like a human being—and was so horrible because it did not look entirely like one.

"You know how to use this," said Burt curtly, "if you do know everything I ever did. I did some amateur theatricals in college."

The alien nodded benignly. Its flexible plastic fingers deftly opened the wrapped parcel Burt handed over.

"Your memories," it said blandly, "are excellent preparation for passing as a human on this world."

It spread out the make-up kit. It set up the mirror. It began to work with the grease-paint, smearing the flesh-colored stuff over its brown plastic skin. Burt watched. Then he spoke to it in a low voice.

"I think I should tell you," he said quietly, "that you are color-blind."

The figure regarded itself in the mirror.

"When you think," said Burt, "you'll realize that it's important. You're color-blind! You can't pass as a human without the help of human beings you can trust. Trust, remember! The only way you can live safely and securely on this world is to make a proper bargain with our government. You'll be given an asylum and concealment in exchange for technical information."

The thing said coldly:

"Are you thinking to deceive me?"

"No," said Burt. "To enlighten you."

The creature ignored him. It worked the grease-paint into the plastic. Its face and throat and neck. Its cunningly formed hands and arms up to what should have been its elbows. It seemed able to recall every movement Burt had made, years before, making

up for collegiate amateur theatricals.

It was infernally intelligent. It had infernally great abilities. Between a little after last midnight and the time of Burt's awakening near noon of today, it had learned to speak English by the examination of his memories. In the same time it had made for itself, out of the plastic of its parachute, a flexible human body, very near to perfection among things of the kind. These were strictly individual achievements, not depending solely on the technology its race had developed. And these were evidences of a kind of intelligence that Burt would have admired—however reluctantly in an alien—but for the wholly unreasonable fact that the creature did not normally have a human-shaped body.

As he watched, Burt saw it make astonishingly human-like motions. But suddenly it did something which shocked him out of all reason, for the thing that it was. The alien had used its humanoid form with skill, bending the arms only at the shoulder and elbow and wrist. But it did not actually have bones. It found some clumsiness in its pretense of humanity. It bent its left forearm to reach some-

thing, exactly as if there had been a fourth joint there, or else as if there had been bones and both had snapped. And Burt's stomach protested violently at the sight.

The thing looked in the mirror. It applied lipstick. It put the stuff horribly into the mouth of its mask, working it about. It applied tooth-enamel to its brown teeth. It looked estimatingly at Burt—turning whiter and sicker as the process went on—for a comparison.

Norma grew more and more tense as the travesty of humanity developed, according to the alien's own best perception of what would be perfectly deceptive to the eye.

"In a little while," said the creature tonelessly, "you will drive me back into the town we just left. Your memories tell me that for money you creatures will do anything. Money will buy anything. I will get money. Your memories even tell me where to get it and what the safe of a bank is like. My energy weapon, of course, will make it easy."

Burt stared, his eyes wide in astounded unbelief.

"You mean," he said in flat incredulity, "that you—with the knowledge you've got—

the technology you know about—the civilization you represent—you'll come to Earth and rob a bank?"

The alien said flatly:

"Of course. It will be convenient to have money. Naturally I will take it. You are only human beings."

Norma had neither eaten nor drunk since morning, nor Burt for a longer time than that, but neither of them thought of such things now. The creature from space completed its make-up job to its own satisfaction. Then it said tonelessly:

"Now you will take me to the bank."

"It will be unwise now," said Burt. He added bitterly, "I'm not thinking of your welfare! But with a lot of people about the streets, there is more likely to be an alarm. If you're interrupted, you may have to kill a hundred people to get away."

The alien spoke without emotion. "You would kill a hundred mice."

"The point is," Burt told it doggedly, "that human bank-robbers can't kill a hundred people! If you do, it will be evident that you aren't human. If it becomes evident that a bank has been robbed by a non-human creature, the

newspapers will be full of it. The radio news will broadcast it. If your enemies have agents on earth, they'll know it immediately."

The eyes in the grease-painted mask regarded him unwaveringly. Burt knew that a search was being made among the memories that had been stolen from him, for sensory data to confirm or refute what he had just said. The alien knew sounds Burt had heard, but it had had to work out for itself what words might mean. It knew newspaper headlines Burt had read, but it had to deduce from words spoken about them, what the newspapers said. It had had less than twenty-four hours in which to acquire—by second-hand experience—a knowledge of a human world. It had done, so far, better than any human being could possibly do. But there were bound to be limits to its ability to understand, so soon.

It said, after a moment:

"Yes. Your memories justify what you have said. I shall wait until humans sleep."

It sat quietly in the back. After a moment it said:

"Turn out the light."

Burt turned out the light. There was silence. Above the cart-track there was a narrow

band of stars. Frogs croaked somewhere a little way off. Burt felt a slight movement beside him. He reached out and Norma's hand closed frightenedly over his. There was not much reassurance he could give her.

"I should repeat to you," said Burt steadily to the darkness behind him, "that you need human help. You are colorblind!"

"You will explain," said the voice in the back.

"Your eyes do not see as ours do. There is color. The word does not mean anything to you. Maybe you see by what to us is in infra-red. But you do not see as we do. You cannot make up your face, by your eyesight, to look right by ours."

"My face and hands are like yours now," said the alien. "I compared. I know."

"You can't tell!" insisted Burt doggedly. "You do not look like a human. You look like a zombie! If you speak to a woman, she will scream. Speak to a man, and he will be frightened! You look like hell—to us!"

The alien said coldly:

"Turn on the light."

Burt turned on the light. The alien said:

"Norma. Turn and look at me."

Slowly, the girl turned. The creature in the back should have looked like a man. But it had used powder and its skin was a sickly dead white. It had shadowed under its eyes, because there were shadows under Burt's eyes now. Its own unwinking orbs were enormously emphasized, so that they looked terrifyingly remote from humankind—as they were. Its mouth was vividly red, and wrongly shaped.

Norma gasped.

She looked as if in another instant she would cry out shrilly.

"Turn out the light," said the alien.

Burt turned out the light. He could not tell if the alien were offended in its vanity—or if it had vanity. He could not tell whether its intelligence was so great that it would recognize facts which its intellect must discern, but which its senses could not verify, or whether it had a pride-of-race equal to the impassioned pride of men, so that it could not admit itself to be dependent on inferior creatures.

"I shall test this," said the alien tonelessly. "I shall see how other humans act when they see me. If you have lied I shall kill you both."

Burt licked his lips. He said steadily:

"There is nothing on earth I want to do more than to kill you. But I tell the truth. You cannot live on Earth without men. You cannot force men to serve you. I can arrange for my government to bargain with you—even forgive the murder of that poor devil in the tank-truck because you didn't know what you were doing. I offer to get you a hiding-place and protection from your enemies and secrecy so your existence won't be known to them. But you'll have to trade the technical information you have and that we haven't got yet. Unless you make that bargain—you're finished! And you can take it or leave it!"

It was an ultimatum which was absolutely based on fact. But it was not one that a man could take from a lower animal. It was not one that the alien could take from men.

Burt's muscles abruptly seemed to turn to water. He slumped in his seat. Norma, simultaneously, went absolutely limp. The two of them sagged helplessly where they sat. They were conscious, but unable to move. They were two utterly inert heaps on the front-seat cushion. They could not even try to stir. Burt, at

first, could only hate helplessly.

Nothing happened. Nothing. The alien had reduced the two to helplessness as a man might tether a horse. It did not want to pay attention to them. It numbed them to wait for it to use them again.

The helplessness lasted for a very long time indeed. The night-insects chirruped and stridulated outside the car. The breeze blew softly among the pine branches. The thing from space remained perfectly still. It waited for an appropriate time to leave this place and go back to the town through which it had recently passed. Perhaps it meditated upon materials to be bought, machines to be contrived, devices to be duplicated, and ultimately a headlong rush through space away from this world. For such purposes, money would be required, humans would have to be bribed, workshops established. The alien prepared to secure money as the practical means of getting things done on the planet Earth. It was the most practical way. So the creature from the stars would use the technology of a race that had conquered interstellar space, and the powers developed in a thousand thousand years of

progress—to rob a bank in a small country town.

It seemed centuries, but it was really no more than two hours before feeling and strength returned together in a rush to Burt's arms and legs and body. In those two hours, Burt had had perforce to think. He had thought with some clarity, if not to any encouraging purpose. But because he no longer had any illusions about the entity in the back seat of his car, he could never feel any more fear of it. Even his fears for Norma were changed in kind. He no longer hated the alien to any great degree. But he knew, now, a deep and implacable enmity for the creature that did not need hatred for energy. The alien was an enemy of mankind because of its very constitution. Because it existed. Because it was what it was. It might be a criminal among its own kind, or it might be in some unimaginable fashion a very gallant soldier. But on Earth it was an outlaw and a foe.

Burt raised himself carefully and helped Norma again to sit upright. The thing said:

"You will drive me to the town. I intend to rob the bank. Then I will have money to hire men to serve me. You

are not as useful as you could be."

There might have been a sneer in the last phrase, but Burt could not tell. He said in a voice as completely without emotion as the creature's own:

"I will need to turn the car around."

He started the motor. He turned on the headlights. He looked at Norma, shuddering in the seat beside him.

"All right, Norma?"

She moistened her lips and nodded, breathing fast.

He turned the car a hundred yards on, in a weed-grown open field. He drove back through the thicket. Presently he came out on the highway, and the traffic was much thinner now, and he crossed the road and headed back the way he had come.

It had been nearer three hours than two since he stopped at the drug-store for make-up. The drug-store was closed. In the brightly lighted four-block business section there was practically no traffic at all. The marquee of the movie theater was dark. There was a car parked at a filling-station, getting gas before that station closed too. There was only one pedestrian on the sidewalk, and he turned a corner and vanished as Burt

drove past the first traffic light. That light made small clicking sounds and turned red. After a decorous interval, it made other clicking sounds and turned green again.

Burt drove with great calmness to a position opposite the bank. He drew in to the curb and stopped.

"There are still cars coming through here," he said coldly, "so if you break in the front door it will be noticed and you will be interrupted. To keep you from killing people, I suggest that you break in from the back. There will undoubtedly be a burglar-alarm, which I do not doubt you will set off."

The creature said tonelessly:

"You will wait here."

It opened the rear car-door and walked across the street. Burt said calmly:

"I can't move my legs. Can you, Norma?"

"N-no," said Norma very quietly. "We'll have to wait."

Burt turned his head and watched the alien in motion. It looked convincingly human at any one moment, but the sum of several moments was less than satisfying. But it happened that no car passed through the town at just this moment. The creature's face had not been seen by anybody

but Burt and Norma, up to this time.

Burt watched with an odd detachment. He had stopped feeling anything in particular except a strong conviction that sooner or later the alien would slip in some fashion and he would kill it—or someone would. It was not at all a usual way to feel. Burt did not analyze his sensations, but if an opportunity had arisen to cause the alien's death at the cost of his own, he would have seized it with the most matter-of-fact promptness. The thing, indeed, intended to kill him presently because he was not a good nor satisfactory domestic animal.

The thing from space, wearing Burt's clothes, walked into an alleyway beside the bank. Its gait was near but not quite the way a man walks. It undulated. It vanished.

"It's going to kill us, I think," said Norma quietly.

"I think that's the intention," agreed Burt. "I'm sorry, Norma. You can't walk, can you? I can't."

She shook her head. She said steadily:

"I don't think we matter. If you can crash the car somehow, Burt, so it'll be sure to be killed . . ."

He nodded, and said with a warmth that was peculiar, under the circumstances:

"You're a good sport. I'm sorry you're in this, but you're a good partner for anything. Even dying, if it comes to that."

There was a very small noise across the street. Something like cracklings. Then a thump.

"He's getting in a door," said Burt. "He'd burn it in. I would guess he set off a burglar-alarm, but I don't hear anything. Maybe there'll be police—poor devils!"

"You can't drive?"

"Not without feet to use," he told her. "The starter's on the floor, and the accelerator too. I'm afraid not."

They waited. Burt's mind no longer hunted frantically for ways to escape the creature now in the bank. He only searched continually and coldly for a way to thwart or destroy it. The emergency weapon was the key to everything. It had to be gotten rid of. Even if the creature were killed, and Burt with it, that weapon had to be disposed of so it could not possibly be picked up by somebody and set off by accident or deliberately out of curiosity.

"It's odd," said Norma absorbedly, "how one gets past

being afraid. You aren't, Burt. I like you for it."

He said deliberately:

"If we'd lived, I think we'd have married. I hope so. I like you too."

They looked at each other. It seemed almost humorous to have taken time out for a mutual avowal of sentiment while waiting outside a bank that was being robbed, for the creature who abstractedly intended to kill them. Norma smiled faintly.

A curious small scratching noise came from the bank-building across the street. The front of the building was unchanged, of course. But around the edges of a window with a drawn-down shade, a flickering blue-white glow appeared. It had the uncertain waverings of electric sparks: of a torch: an arc.

"It's burning into the safe," said Burt. "It will pass for a thermit-job, maybe. That weapon is versatile! Paralysis-gun, heat-ray, electric arc—and it says it can be detonated as a bomb."

The nearest traffic light clicked and changed color. A red convertible roared in low gear. It hurtled down the empty street and was gone. The light at the edge of the bank-building window at-

tracted no attention. The noise was very faint indeed. Maybe the arc which made it would create interference in radio or television sets, but the hour was late.

"Queer we're so calm," said Norma. "I haven't a bit of hope, but I don't feel hysterical. The creature will be killed sooner or later, of course."

"It's too bad we can't read its memories as it read mine," said Burt wryly. "If there are ships among the stars—and there are—it could tell us how they're made. And that weapon is no bigger than a revolver. If our scientists could only work on that . . ."

There was a muffled thud across the street. It was not loud enough to attract attention. The two in the car were especially conscious of it, of course. They were quite helpless, with the lower part of their bodies paralyzed by the exotic alien emergency device. They could not hope to attract the attention of other humans. There was nobody else on the street. If they called anybody, the alien would hear. If they managed to get themselves lifted out of the car, or if they signalled another car to a stop, the alien would kill other humans—kill in wholesale lots

—to destroy them. There was no purpose to be served by getting other people killed with nothing else achieved.

The traffic lights clicked and changed color. There was no car waiting to take advantage of a green light. There was tranquility. Street-lamps on brick pavements, closed-up stores. In one darkened window a ring-shaped light around one special advertising sign blinked senselessly off and on. There was the smell of tree-shaded streets in the air. The traffic lights clicked and changed.

The alien walked out of the lane beside the bank. It carried a bag. It crossed the sidewalk and strode across the street to the car. At a distance it looked human, but nearby the make-up on its face was unearthly. The face was white like the belly of a dead fish. It had put deep blue shadows under its eyes. They were staring, unwinking eyes at best. They looked demonic in the dead-white face.

It opened the back of the car and put the bag inside.

"There is a great deal of coin," the voice said tonelessly. "You will come and carry part of it."

It stood by the partly opened back door. Its plastic hand disappeared. Life and

feeling and strength came back to the lower part of Burt's body. He could move his legs again.

The traffic light clicked and changed color. Down the street, behind Burt, a car-motor roared. The thing from space turned.

Burt was in the act of unfastening the door beside him when the unseen car behind—going the same way Burt's car was. headed—whined shrilly as it accelerated. Burt was stepping down into the street when the speeding car's horn blatted fiercely. The unknown driver was acting as some people do. The instant the traffic-light changed, he had shot his car ahead, shifted gear, and jammed down the accelerator to streak through the lighted empty street at sixty miles an hour.

When the horn blatted the alien turned sharply. And maybe under any other circumstances the driver could have swerved in time. But the alien turned upon him the face of a walking corpse, a zombie, something with glittering eyes straight out of hell itself. A metal object appeared in its hands.

The car hit. There was an indescribably horrible thud. But even more horrible was

the way the alien's body yielded to the impact. It did not crush, as the body of a man with bones would have done. It flexed. It bent. It *flowed* into a cup-like, completely impossible flattened mass—still clothed in Burt's garments—which clung to the front of the speeding car for twenty feet or more and then dropped slackly in the highway. And the car raced on ahead.

Burt glimpsed the driver's face for the fraction of an instant. It was a mask of unbelieving horror. The car roared desperately into the distance. The driver did not look back.

Then Burt realized two things simultaneously. One was that the metal object—the alien's weapon—had been knocked from its grasp. It had skidded to a stop no more than ten feet from where Burt stood absurdly with one foot on the pavement. The other was the fact that the mass of clothing which lay in the highway a little distance off, no longer looked even remotely human.

The arms and legs were empty. The head was deflated. The face had collapsed like an empty flexible mask—which it was—and lay at an impossible angle to its neck.

And the trunk of the body was no longer the rough flattened-cylinder shape which is proper to a human body. This thing bulged. It was almost a globe. It changed and was almost egg-shaped. It writhed and pulsated like a monstrous ameboid thing inside its human garmenture.

The sight of it was pure horror, in the deserted, brightly lighted street of a small town on a summer night. The thing inside the garments writhed blindly, and extended psuedopods within the enclosing cloth, and the empty, collapsed face and head turned foolishly, and the flattened, empty arms and legs jerked and stirred without purpose . . .

Burt picked up the metal thing which was the weapon the creature had used for everything from the demonstration-murder of an oil-truck driver to the burning open of a small bank's safe. He was icy cold, and he had thought he could have no further emotional reactions, but his stomach turned at the sight of the movements of the thing in the street.

He put the weapon in his pocket. He started the car. He drove savagely away. By instinct he swerved to avoid hitting the writhing thing. It

was not that he meant to spare it. In taking its weapon, he had destroyed it. But he felt an overwhelming revulsion to touching it with anything—even the wheels of his car.

He roared away. But he could not help glancing behind in the rear-view mirror. The last glimpse he had of it showed it resuming human shape. When it was a bare speck in the mirror it was upraised on four stumpy projections, but the head-mask dangled emptily. It might be beginning to reform arms and legs.

Burt jammed down the accelerator. He wanted to get away from there! Beside him, above the whistling of wind past the car's windows, he heard Norma's teeth chattering.

Simply not having the alien in the car was enough to produce a completely fictitious feeling of safety. It was an enormous relief merely not to be near the monster any longer. True, Norma's legs—as she told Burt—had no sensation in them. She and Burt had both been left helpless while the alien opened the bank safe. Burt had been released from helplessness to carry loot. But Norma was still incapacitated.

"It'll be a hospital for you," said Burt grimly. "But the first need is to get as far away as possible from where we've marooned the thing. It hasn't got its weapon now. It has to hide. But it's infernally intelligent and it could be deadly even unarmed. So we want to get away!"

Norma said quickly: "We shouldn't try to use the—weapon to free me. It could, but we don't know how to use it."

Burt nodded. They were half an hour away from the place of their escape. The road was straight and empty before them. They were back in the foothills, and trees and hillsides flashed into view in the headlight rays and swept swiftly toward them, and then darted past and were gone.

Burt brought out the weapon he'd picked up. He looked at it in the light of the instrument-board. It was completely cryptic. There was no handle designed for a human hand to grasp—though the creature had been able to use its plastic human-seeming hands to hold and use it. It was flat and irregular in shape, and there were studs on both sides. They were recessed, and it was obviously from pressure upon different

combinations of them that the instrument acted in different fashions—as a paralysis-beam or a heat-ray or—so the creature had said—could detonate as an atomic bomb. It would not be possible to guess in advance which studs would release Norma from her helplessness.

Burt put it away.

"When I get a chance I'm going to fix it so it can't be turned on accidentally."

He felt perfectly safe, but he had overlooked something. A human criminal parachuted among savages would be cock-of-the-walk only so long as he had modern weapons. If he were disarmed, he would need to hide. Burt inevitably thought of the alien as like a civilized man among primitives. He hadn't seen it, actually, except clothed and masked as a man. But the creature did not think of itself as a civilized man among savages. It had phrased its viewpoint with precision when it likened its view of men to Burt's view of rats and mice. Its attitude toward mankind was that of a man to rats.

An armed human among intelligent rats would be at ease. Disarmed, he would be less at ease. But he would not hide. He would try instantly

and furiously to recover his weapons or make new ones.

The alien would not try to hide because he was disarmed.

But Burt didn't happen to reason in that obvious fashion. He meant to drive the night through and get completely out of the area in which the thing must—he considered—conceal itself. He had evidence to demand instant belief and cooperation from the FBI. He had loot from a bank, and when the manner of its robbery was examined carefully, it would check with Burt's tale. The alien would have burned open a door, where a human would get in more easily. Even the burned-open safe would not appear a torch job when carefully looked over. There was the fact of the burned oil-truck. There was Norma's present condition. Above all, X-ray examination of the alien weapon would prove its non-human origin. A quiet and grim hunt would instantly be made for the fugitive from space. It would be captured. Then the bargain Burt had offered would be forced upon it. It would tell whatever it knew that could be useful to humans. Or else.

Then Norma said shakily: "I think my legs are coming to life again!"

Burt was not a particularly safe driver, for a while. He was desperately intent upon the symptoms of Norma's recovery from the paralysis-beam. He did not even notice when the car roared through a deep cut, past a place where the road's surface was seared with fire, and the rocky side-walls were sooted, and the grass and weeds off the concrete were burned to gray ash. But the remains of the oil-truck had been taken away.

They went on and on through the night, and Norma found sensation returning, and the power of movement, and presently she said exultantly that she could walk and wanted to try.

Under the circumstances, a certain lack of forethought was natural.

They stopped at the very first of the service areas which by its lights was open for business at this hour. Burt had the gas-tank filled at the pump. Norma got out and walked about, exuberantly.

"It's wonderful!" she said softly, stopping by Burt's side of the car. "I feel giddy! I feel light-headed." Then she smiled at him. "And—I think we know each other now,

Burt, after what we've been through. I like what I know about you."

"We'll get something to eat," said Burt, "and then go on. Nothing much can be done before morning, anyhow."

He drove over to the diner, but Norma walked for joy in the obedience of her legs to her will. They were smiling at each other when they entered the diner which here catered to the public.

Burt always remembered that moment. There was a counter, and stools before it, and a stout man reading a newspaper. He had a radio turned on. As Burt and Norma walked in, he jerked his head to stare at the instrument.

"—apparently a maniac," said a reedy voice, "walked up to the filling-station attendant and attacked him without warning. He broke his neck, then approached the car, whose driver threatened him with a revolver. The maniac seized the arm holding the pistol and with super-human strength pulled the driver out through the window. He dashed him to the ground, killing him instantly. He then climbed in the car, but the driver's wife, in the back, opened the door and

jumped out, screaming. The maniac headed east on the post highway, the car swerving crazily. The only living witness, the woman whose husband was killed, hysterically insists that the maniac has a dead-white face and glittering eyes. It is presumed that now he is armed . . ."

Burt took Norma's arm and turned her around. They walked out of the diner again. Both of them were ashen-white. Burt led the way fiercely to the car. They were almost at it when a car came racing furiously along the way they had come. It swerved and roared into the service area. Burt put his hand on Norma's shoulder and pressed her fiercely downward.

"Behind the car!" he commanded thickly. "It's here!"

He watched through the car's windows from the outside. The other car braked to a stop, with screamings of tortured brake-bands. A figure got out of it. It went toward the diner.—It passed within twenty feet of Burt and Norma, but the car was between. It went into the diner.

It was the alien.

Burt thrust Norma into the car and closed the door with a desperate softness. He plunged to the alien's car and

snatched out its ignition key.

There were sounds inside the diner. The fat man, inside there, had turned from a broadcast about a maniac with a white face and eyes like a ghoul. He looked up to see what looked like a zombie with a white face and eyes like a fiend from hell. The creature asked a question in an unhuman, toneless voice. The fat man gagged and goggled. He made absurd pawing motions in the air, as if to push the alien away. When the alien moved toward him, the fat man screamed.

Burt was in the act of letting in the clutch when he heard the shots. He was in the act of darting out the service-area exit to the highway again, when the alien came out of the diner. It had heard the retreating car. It began to run, very terribly, in pursuit. But it could not overtake the roaring car in all-out flight.

— It was a long time later and many miles along the road before Burt could steady his voice to speak. Then he said in horror-struck revulsion:

"It was—coming after us! For its weapon! I got the ignition-key of its car . . ."

He nursed his car around a curve engineered for forty

miles an hour. He was doing better than seventy. The road became a straightaway and the speedometer needle climbed higher, higher, and higher yet.

Norma said faintly: "The filling-station man—"

"I think," said Burt grimly, "it will kill him. It will have to wait until another car comes. Then it will take that to follow us. It will kill the people . . . It has to catch us. We have its weapon!"

"But how—" chattered Norma, "h-how did it know—?"

Burt said bitterly: "It knows all my memories. It can work out how I'll think. It can figure out the choices I'll make. What I'll do—where I'll go—whether I stay on this road or dodge aside . . ."

The car went roaring onward through the night. Trees, hillsides, open fields, appeared for an instant and were gone.

A long time later, winking headlights appeared behind. They were not often visible. They blinked into view and vanished again. Sometimes they were not seen for minutes on end.

When they reappeared, though, they were always a little nearer.

They turned their car again, and again, and yet again. Norma finally grasped the necessity of introducing randomness into their choice of possible paths. She said, "Right" or "left" or "straight ahead" when time for a new choice turned up.

A long time later they drove beside a rushing, foaming mountain stream, under trees which arched completely over the narrow highway. Now and again the headlights glared out over the speeding water. Now and again they could look up and see vast mountain-flanks silhouetted against the star-filled sky overhead.

The road curved and climbed steeply, and they were riding into a very small town indeed, and there was a barrier with a red lantern on it, and half a dozen cars bunched beyond it, and people standing about. A state trooper flagged them to a stop. His hand was grimly at his pistol-holster until he had peered into the car and seen both Burt's and Norma's faces.

"All traffic's stopped," he said curtly. "There's a maniac running loose in a car. Roads aren't safe. You'll be all right here. Stick around."

Burt nodded, and steered

the car to a place among the others. He stopped it. Norma said in a whisper:

"Should we say anything?"

"No," Burt told her. "What we have to say wouldn't be believed here. But it might reach the newspapers. *We'd* be suspected of mania—especially with that bank loot in the back! We talk to the FBI and nobody else."

He looked keenly out at the people from the other stopped cars. There were a dozen or more, talking uneasily in groups. Now and again a voice came abruptly from the short-wave set in the trooper's car. That would be state police headquarters:

It was two-thirty in the morning, and very cool. The town was a very small one indeed—no more than twenty or thirty houses and two stores. But two highways crossed in it, and the state trooper was halting all traffic on both. Burt considered. He got out to learn the news. Norma came with him.

They listened. The waiting motorists talked in hushed tones. They told each other, over and over, the grisly tale of murder: The maniac had started his career when he killed a filling-station attendant in a small town. Somebody'd just learned that the

bank had been robbed there! The dead motorist's wife had described the maniac as pale as death, with glittering eyes and possessed of incredible strength. Thirty miles east the maniac had gone into a service area, killed a diner-cook and a gas attendant, and then waited for another car to turn in. Four men were in the car. The maniac killed two, crippled a third, and the fourth fled into the darkness. The survivors' description of the maniac—who had gone away eastward in their car—confirmed the first account. One of them used a telephone in the diner to report the atrocity. Four dead there, one injured. There was further alerting of all state police-cars.

A trooper found a car abandoned. It was the one taken from the four men of whom two had been killed. It had run out of gas. The bodies of a man and woman were found nearby. Apparently they had stopped to offer help, the maniac had killed them, and then it had gone on in their car.

When they heard where this last event had happened, Burt and Norma tensed. They'd turned off the main highway. The alien had fol-

lowed, infallibly. Burt had made the decision to turn. The alien had made the same decision.

It had crashed into a police-car set to block a highway. The trooper died, there. The creature had evidently secured another car, because a dead man was found with no car to account for his presence. And a car had gone around the wreckage, out again on the soft shoulder of the road.

That had taken place along the exact line of Burt's and Norma's flight. Cold prickles went down Burt's spine when he heard where that happened! The alien had unerringly followed four successive choices of right-or-left turns, made by Burt. It could anticipate what choices Burt would make, from its analysis of his past experiences. But the last few decisions had been Norma's. And the alien could not tell what she would choose. Whether to take a right or a left-hand branching of a highway. Whether to take the shortest route to a destination or a longer one. These decisions did not follow the pattern Burt's mind would have made. The creature from space could not tell what they would be.

Which, of course, was un-

questionably why they had not been overtaken.

The short-wave speaker in the trooper's car spoke in staccato fashion:

"All cars . . . All cars . . . Ten minutes ago a car traveling eighty miles an hour ran into a traffic barricade at Coytesville. It smashed the barrier, the driver lost control, and the car swerved into an empty-store-building and caught fire. It is now burning with the building. This may be the maniac. Caution will be continued, but this may be the man . . ."

Buzzing talk all around the barricade. It sounded right. Only a maniac would drive a car eighty miles an hour at night, so he couldn't stop at a red-lighted barricade. If the maniac had been killed in the crash and his body burned in the building, it served him right. People talked more loudly, while Burt and Norma listened. They were relieved. How many had he killed? Two at the first filling station, four at the second, a man and a woman, a state trooper and another man. Ten people killed by one maniac in a night's orgy of madness. But it must have been the maniac who'd been killed, because only a maniac would drive eighty miles an hour and

through a red-lighted barricade.

Which was true, but there are maniacs and maniacs.

Time passed, and they waited, and there were no further reports of atrocities. It seemed more and more likely that the murderous creature had been killed and his body burned in a car and an empty store-building. Some of the motorists grew impatient. Burt did not. He moved about at the edge of the grouping of waiting people. There was a wire-strand fence at the side of the road. One strand was broken. The loose end trailed. An idea came to Burt.

He broke off the snapped wire, by bending it repeatedly at one place. It was stout, stiff, fence-wire. He trailed seven or eight feet of it back to the car. He took out a pair of pliers. He snipped off a short length of wire and wrapped it once around the alien's weapon—and twisted the end. He repeated the process. He began to enclose the cryptic device in a series of tightly-drawn, tightly-twisted lengths of wire, any one of which would prevent pressure on any operating-stud underneath it, and all of which would prevent the device from being used at all

until the wire covering had been removed, strand by strand.

The tiny hamlet about them slept soundly. There were seven cars waiting for assurance of safety. But the short-wave report did sound as if all danger was over. It seemed extremely plausible that the maniac—or the alien from space—had been killed and his body destroyed in a burned-down empty store-building.

But Burt had had a shock. The alien had followed his choices of choices of ways to go. It was possible, at least, that it had been able to anticipate that Burt would ultimately make Norma choose the way he drove. If that were true—at the moment when knowing Burt's mind would do no good—the alien would abandon the direct chase. It would go on to something else. It would not abandon its emergency weapon. It could not.

But it could know exactly how Burt would react.

He thought very grimly as he finished encasing the weapon. The alien could not anticipate that. It couldn't reason that Burt would find a loose fence-wire and have time to make use of it to make

the weapon useless—for a time, at least. But there had to be a decision the alien could anticipate, which it would do it no good to know in advance. It would be completely implacable. It had to have its weapon back. It couldn't be allowed to have it. So it had to be trapped and killed, once and for all.

There was one decision it would do the alien no good to be able to foresee. Burt lifted his head from where he worked on the weapon.

"Norma," he said quietly, "You've got to make a plan. Good or bad, it doesn't matter. But it has to be yours. Now listen . . ."

He talked quietly. Presently there was a staccato noise from the trooper's car—the short-wave set. When it ended, there were stirrings. Burt got out as one of the waiting cars droned into low and started off along the highway. Others were whirring their starters. Burt asked questions. The fire had been put out and the body of the man in the eighty-mile car had been examined. He was a big man, six feet and over in height. He should have been a powerful man. He could have been capable of the maniac's atrocities. Traffic was permitted to move, again.

Burt went back and took the wheel.

"It wasn't the creature, but a human being," he told Norma. "The creature's bound to be hiding now. It'll be waiting for us. Where?"

Gray dawn began, and it was a matter of only ten or fifteen miles to the town where both Burt and Norma lived. Before them, on a narrow highway, there was a long procession of clumsy, make-shift, slatted farm-trucks. Burt came up to the last of them and glanced at Norma. She shook her head slightly. He fell in behind the line, not trying to pass. She said:

"I feel foolish, telling you what to do."

Burt said carefully: "The creature can figure out every decision I'll make, including the decision that it can figure out what I'll decide. But it doesn't know what you'll decide. So you know what we want to do, and you're deciding the moves toward it. That is the one way to outguess the creature."

Norma protested: "But we're betting our lives on acting illogically."

They were. In order to have any real hope of living on, Burt and Norma had to

convince somebody—the FBI preferably—that the alien was real and what he was, and that he simply must be captured. Obviously, they must produce that belief without giving the thing from space a chance to kill them first. Since he knew their purpose and had—to put it mildly—no scruples at all, the last item was difficult. Their danger was not one particle less than it had been. The alien was infernally intelligent, and its desperation was complete. It would even risk detection to get its weapon back, because its enemies might not ever learn of its landing, but it could not survive on earth unarmed. Because it was not human!

The car trailed the odorous line of farm-trucks toward the city. The dawnlight strengthened. Presently Burt said somberly:

“The thing’ll have changed its appearance by now. It knows it can’t go on when everybody screams as soon as they see it.”

“But it’s color-blind! What can it do?”

“It’s got my memories,” said Burt bitterly. “It’ll think of sun-glasses to hide its eyes—and there’s at least one pair in nearly every car’s glove-compartment. It’ll think of a

false beard to hide its face and mouth. I’d be willing to bet that somewhere there’s been a beauty-salon window smashed so somebody could snatch a wig off a mannikin. It could make a beard. I wore a false one, once, in amateur theatricals! I’ll bet I could describe it by now. Soft hat pulled down low. Long coat and beard. Dark glasses. Probably a cane or a crutch to walk with. It’ll figure out that it can’t just melt into the human race and have nobody look at it. You notice unusual things about a commonplace man—pallor, or anything else. But in an unusual figure, the odd is commonplace!”

He glowered. Norma said hopefully:

“Do you realize that though it can know what you do because it knows all your experiences, you can know what it’ll do because you know every bit of information it has about Earth?”

Burt blinked. He thought it over. Then he brightened.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way! But it’s so! And it puts a new light on things! Hmm.”

Daylight was here, now, and very far away they could just see the tall buildings of the city which was their home, rising from the smoky mist that seems to cover most

cities at dawning. A little way ahead a neat secondary road led off to the right, away from where it was Burt's instinct and purpose to go, and where the alien should expect to meet him. The market-trucks rumbled ahead a little more swiftly now. But when Burt reached that minor highway, he turned aside with a new decisiveness. He drove not toward the city but toward a suburban town some twenty miles away which he chose because he had never been there in his life before, and the creature from emptiness could not possibly find it in his memories.

As he stepped cheerfully on the gas, the sun lifted from the horizon and all the world and wide green fields looked beautifully alive and sparkling.

His activities, he explained gravely to Norma, were deliberate folly, because the alien couldn't imagine such a thing. They had breakfast at an inn, whose earliest customers they were. They lingered over the meal—though as a matter of pure precaution Burt sat where he could watch the doorway and out the windows. Here he secured writing materials and wrote a moderately lengthy note,

with much careful choice of phrasing. When the first stores opened, Burt bought a good-sized suitcase, a flat metal box, an assortment of fishermen's sinkers, and a hunting-knife. Then he drove to a newly opened garage and packed the sinkers in the metal box and had the box brazed shut, all around, so it couldn't be opened again without metal-cutting tools. While the brazing-torch flamed, he went in the back part of the car—his nostrils wrinkled momentarily—and packed the suitcase. He packed it with the bag the alien had brought from the robbed bank. With money. He included the note he'd written with the bag.

Then he found a messenger service and dispatched the carefully locked suitcase by special messenger on an interurban bus. Norma followed him unquestioningly about while he did these cryptic errands.

"Now," he told her when the messenger had started off, "there's just one thing more, besides the phone-calls I'm going to make presently."

"I don't understand in the least," said Norma uneasily. "I know what you've done, but not why."

"The natural thing for me

to do," explained Burt, "would be sensible. Go straight to the FBI at daybreak. Spout my stuff. Show my proofs. I'd go direct to their headquarters, because I wouldn't expect them to believe my yarn and come to me. The creature knows that I am highly intelligent—" he grinned—"so it expects me to be sensible. But I know what it knows, so I'm doing foolish things to confuse it. There's one more thing to do."

He told her. She gasped.

"But it's ridiculous!" she protested. "I never heard of such a thing!"

"You just have," Burt corrected her gently. "Come along."

They had to stand in line. She still protested that it was foolish. But not very energetically.

They drove into their home town at late dusk. Burt had had several conferences with the FBI by telephone. His messenger had delivered the brand-new suitcase to the FBI during the early morning. Opened, the suitcase contained eighteen thousand dollars, robbed from a bank the night before, nearly two hundred miles away. With it there was a note. By the time Burt telephoned, the FBI was

intensely curious and almost inclined to believe a wild tale—but his story was much wilder than they'd expected. But it linked up with the activities of a maniac during the previous night. It coincided with three items in the local police news of early morning: A beauty-shop window had been smashed and a mannikin's wig stolen. A second-hand clothing shop had been robbed. A store for orthopedic appliances broken into. But it was Burt's story that made the orthopedic store discover that one crutch had been stolen with the contents of its cash register.

When a chemist reported on a scrap of brown plastic Burt had enclosed, the FBI was staggered. It began to hunt for somebody—some human—who should have answered Burt's description. They found nobody. They began to be dubious. But half an hour before Burt's return they suddenly became convinced. There was an hotel just opposite the building in which the FBI offices were. In late afternoon one of the housekeepers entered a guest's room and happened to open a closet. She found there the body of a chambermaid. The maid's neck was broken. The occupant—checked in only

that morning—had been a bent and whiskered cripple of convincingly feeble appearance.

It could be guessed that the maid had noticed that his appearance was not wholly human, and had stared at him.

So, as Burt entered the edge of town, a car pulled up alongside his and a man in the car made a recognition signal. Burt felt a little better, but not much. The alien hadn't been caught. It had to be. It looked like it wouldn't be until Burt caught it, and he was grim about that necessity.

So he drove through the dusk and the city traffic to the building where Norma lived. There were shadows in the air and the street lights winked on as he drove. The smell of dust and hot asphalt and gasoline fumes, and a whiff of green stuff, and the sound of people in motion with all their contrivances.

He drove sedately to Norma's address. Night had fallen swiftly, and it was dark when he parked. He saw a movement in the shadows nearby. Distinct cold shadows ran up and down his spine. But then a figure made an agreed-on recognition signal. He felt better. At least one FBI man. He hoped more.

There were. He and Norma

went inside. She was pale. She started a little when she saw a strange elevator-operator. But Burt felt a warm gratitude. It would be his inevitable instinct to take Norma to her home first of all. Before he went to his own apartment. Before he went to the FBI.

In the elevator, the man nodded when Burt looked questioningly at him. The elevator stopped at Norma's floor. They got out and Burt automatically followed her lead down the hall. But suddenly he got ahead of her, and sniffed, and then he said very quietly:

"This is your door?"

She nodded, deathly white. He turned her away from it and gave her a little shove—so she'd go away and let him enter by himself. She'd already given him her key. He put it in the lock and turned it and opened the door—unobtrusively turning the catch so the door could be opened from outside, behind him—and reached in to where Norma had said the light-switch was.

The room leaped into light. Empty. Burt went in. The door closed decisively behind him, and Norma was there with him. She wouldn't be left

behind. The faint, faint, inhuman smell was stronger.

As if the closing of the door had been a signal, the alien came from an inner room. It had a revolver in its hand. It wore a shapeless soft black hat, and a long coat. It had a long and silky beard. But it took off its dark glasses and threw them away. It said tonelessly—in Burt's own voice:

"Give me my weapon."

Burt did not have to feign surprise. The emotional impact of facing the creature was enough. But he slowly reached into his pocket and brought out the brazed-shut metal box. He tossed it on a table near the creature. He said grimly:

"I didn't want it to go off by accident."

The alien picked up the box. Its plastic fingers tore at it. The box did not yield. It pocketed the box and moved—

Burt presented the hunting-knife, drawn and ready. He was completely savage and completely the match of the alien in ferocity, because Norma was here. The alien stopped short and said without expression:

"I would have killed you silently."

Its revolver came up. Burt

snapped off the light and flung Norma aside as two shots crashed in the darkness and the gun clicked empty. Then there was a raging humming noise, wholly unlike any sound that could have been made by a human throat—and the door burst in and flashlight beams darted inward. Burt said sharply:

"That's it!"

The thing stared at the FBI men. It hummed horribly. Then it flung its useless pistol at them with superhuman force and scrambled with incredible agility for the window. It crashed through to the fire-escape. It vanished as the FBI men plunged after it. A hand thrust a flashlight out. There were shoutings. A shot outside. The three men climbed out. One of them started up. There was another shot outside, and whistlings, and there were flickerings of light, and a loud humming noise that had somehow the effect of a scream of fury, only infinitely more terrible to hear.

A man shrieked. There were shots overhead. A fusillade . . .

The man who came back to the apartment looked acutely ill. He held the metal box gingerly in his hands. It was

twisted and bent. A monstrous strength had been exerted upon it, and a brazed seam had begun to give.

"We got it up on the roof," said the FBI man, in the tone of a man talking about something he will have bad dreams about for a long time to come. "It broke one man's arm, but it kept trying to open this box even while we were pumping bullets into it. It came out of that human skin like it was a cocoon, worrying at this box and making that humming noise. What was it?"

Burt was very busy, but he said politely:

"I haven't the least idea what it would be called."

"Listen!" said the FBI man, sweating. "We didn't really believe you, but that money, and then the maid being killed and all—" Burt looked politely annoyed. The FBI man said, "This is—the bomb, isn't it? It almost got at it."

Burt removed one arm from where it was and produced the creature's weapon, elaborately sheathed with twisted wire.

"No. This is the weapon. I didn't want to take a chance of anybody fiddling with it. It goes to Washington. Atomic Energy Commission. Tell them about the creature."

The FBI man took the weapon in a trembling hand.

"We'll tell them about the —thing, whatever it was," he said sickishly. "We'll tell them! My God, did you ever see anything like that in your life?"

"No," said Burt. "I didn't. I'd rather not, anyhow. Look! I don't know what your name is, but could we talk this over in the morning? We just got married today and my wife's rather overwrought. Could you excuse us?"

The FBI man said, "Yeah. Oh, sure!" He went to the door and said: "Until we get orders from Washington, we won't let any news get out. You understand? For the moment, no talking?"

"No talking," agreed Burt. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," said the FBI man. He went out the door. He couldn't remember which of the two objects was the one to be careful of, and he had no clear idea what the thing could do anyhow—except that the creature on the roof had been trying to get at it while it hummed and died. So the FBI man walked very gingerly down the hall carrying both objects very carefully. He walked like a man carrying an atomic bomb.

He was.

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—continued from back cover

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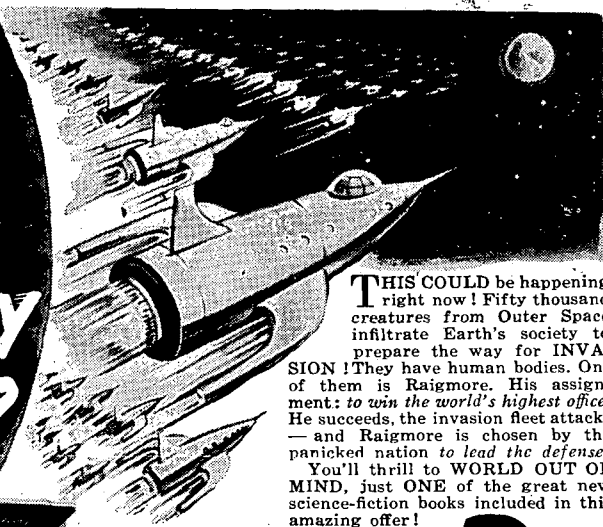
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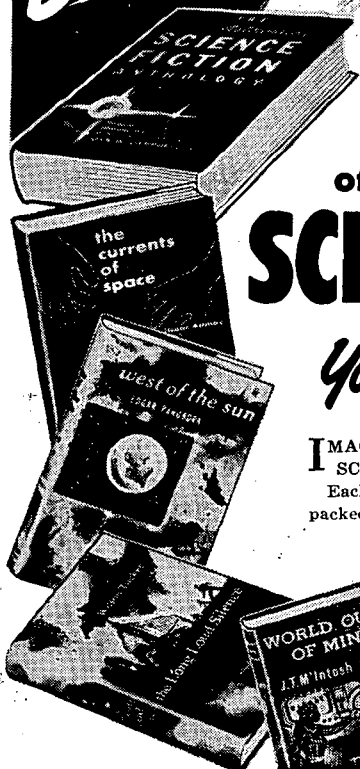
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